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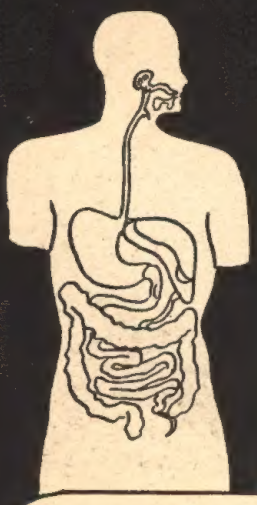

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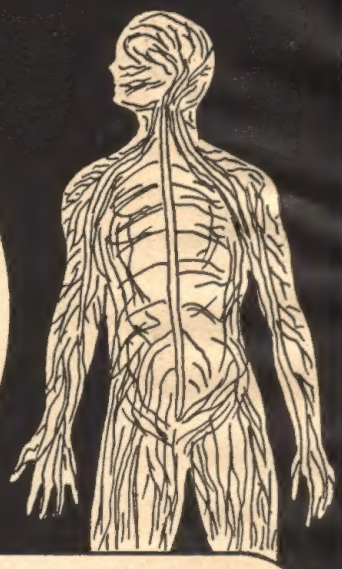

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SHORT STORIES

OMAR THE HARNESS-MAKER *by Allan K. Echols* 62
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Kindly Marshal Mose Hainley proves that he knows plenty about lethal weapons.

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Deputy Bill Rockney displays the fact that he's not a windblown weather vane.

AND

TRAIL TALK *by Foghorn Clancy* 6
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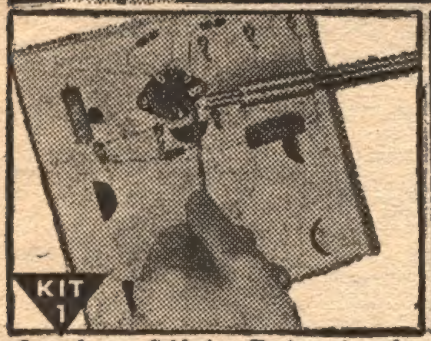

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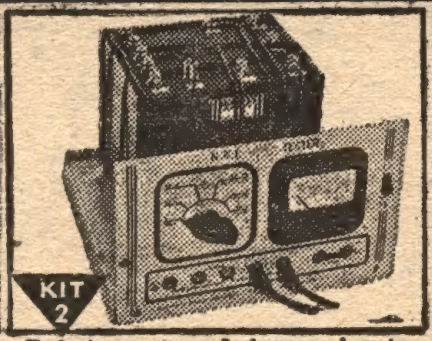

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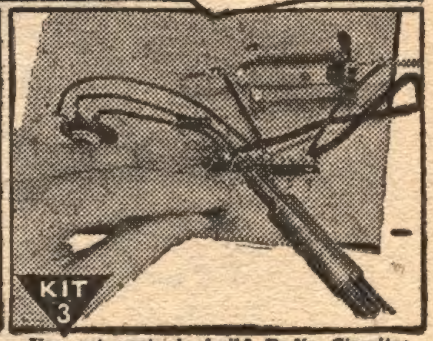

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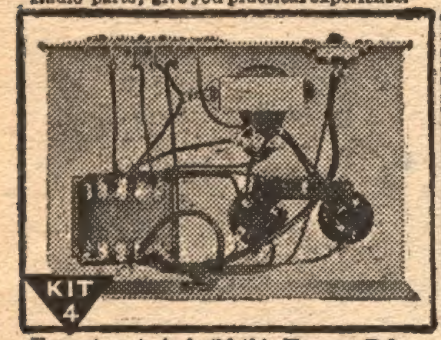

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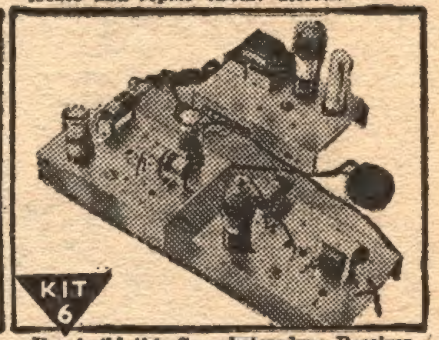

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GREETINGS, waddies, let's hit the saddle again and ride over the trails of yesteryear, over the trails of romance and danger, the trails over which good men and bad men traveled when the West was young.

As it is now winter, suppose we head South, or rather Southwest, where the winters are not so cold. Let's go to Texas, where the trails were as long and as dangerous as in any other part of our great West, where there was as much romance and adventure as there ever was anywhere else in America.

Texas is really a great state, a vast state, an empire, and not everyone realizes how much there is to Texas. This mighty empire of the Southwest sprawls huge across the map, a land of forest and jagged mountains, of rolling prairies, great sleepy rivers, and wide gulf beaches.

It is a land of superlatives—greatest state in size, greatest in production of oil, greatest in growing of cotton. In Texas the past and present meet—the past in the form of booted cowboys riding the range on the last great ranches, or the sombreroed Mexican dozing in the shade of an ancient Spanish mission; the present, in great trading centers and seaports, in flying fields and oil derricks.

Under Six Flags

Rich in history, tradition and legends, Texas has been under six flags and its life still shows the deep imprint of Spanish and Mexican influences. Its area is studded with forts and battlefields of former wars and its history is filled with the names of their heroes. Indian and Spaniard, Mexican and Anglo-American, all have played a part in the history and growth of the state; and all have made contributions to its life.

We are going to backtrack on the old Chisholm Trail and enter Texas at Doan's Crossing on Red River, a spot that countless yarns have been told about, a spot where the trail drivers used to force thousands of cattle into the often swollen and turbulent stream, a spot where many a cowboy and trail driver lost his life. But before we enter let's take a look at the history and size of the great state and find out how it became Texas.

Texas is the twenty-eighth state to be admitted to the Union (it was admitted in 1845) and the only one which, as an independent Nation, joined the Union by treaty.

It derives its name from *tejas*, a word meaning "friend," "friendly" or "allies," which was used by several confederated Indian tribes as a greeting, and by early Spanish explorers as a general designation of all Indians in present-day east Texas.

The Lone Star

It is known as the Lone Star State, from the single star upon the red, white and blue banner which waved over the Texas Republic, and still is the state flag.

Only by comparison can one grasp how much territory is embraced in Texas, and no writer can vividly picture its many and varied wonders. In area it is equal to the combined areas of all New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Illinois.

If Texas could be folded upward and over with its northernmost line as a hinge, Brownsville near its southernmost tip would

(Continued on page 8)

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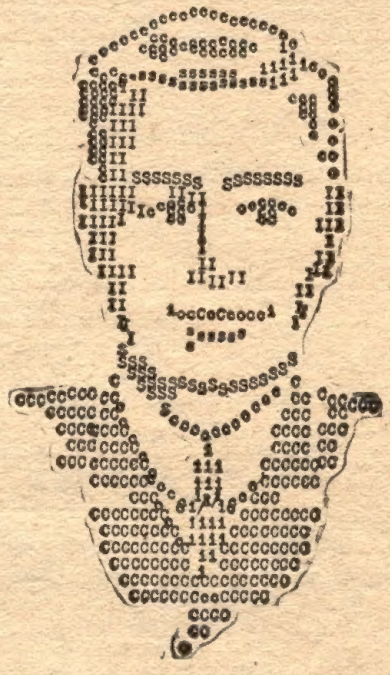

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

be 120 miles from Canada; if eastward, El Paso would be 40 miles off the Florida coast; if westward, Orange on its eastern border, would be out in the Pacific 215 miles beyond Lower California.

One of its cities, Dalhart, in the Panhandle, is nearer the state capitals of New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska and Wyoming than to the Texas capital at Austin, and while it has a semi-tropical climate in the south part of the state, with stately palms, citrus fruit and gardens all winter, I had a friend who once was snowbound, caught in a blizzard and came near freezing to death near this same town of Dalhart, near the northwest border of the state.

This state of Texas occupies one-twelfth of the area of the continental United States. Until just before World War II there were more cattle in Texas than people, yet we would hesitate to make that assertion right now, due to the past and present reputed shortage of beef. However, the population of Texas in 1940 was 6,450,000.

Plains and Mountains

Texas has plains and mountains, sweeping beaches and deep forests, great seaports and teeming inland markets, crowded areas and vast open spaces, spots as comfortably civilized as New York City's Park Avenue, and spots as barrenly wild as Patagonia.

One of the many wonders of the great state is the Caprock. I can remember when I was a kid and first heard folks talk about the Caprock, I thought that it was an immense rock projecting from the earth, but the Caprock is where the North plains and the South plains meet. The North plains are level and have practically a hundred feet higher elevation than do the South plains, and where they meet there is a sheer drop of approximately a hundred feet, miles long, and the South plains start at this rocklike cliff and they too are level. It looks as though some giant power had simply pushed the South plains down to a lower level.

The Hamlet of Antelope

Having crossed Red River on the Old Chisholm Trail at Doan's crossing, we bear west a little way and come to the little town of Antelope, a little hamlet out on the prairie with a population of only 166. Most of the houses are of rough lumber, with adobe chimneys, and are enclosed by split rail fences; smoke houses and barns are of logs.

(Continued on page 10)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

Antelope was once a supply town or point on the cattle trail leading north from this area. The cowboys watered their herds at Antelope Springs, just east of town.

A few miles down the trail from Antelope we enter Lost Valley, with low steep hills all about us. It was here that in 1875 there was a battle between Texas Rangers and a band of Indians. Here a brave and a squaw, separated from the main band, were surrounded by Rangers, and the warrior, though wounded, fought to the last, even rising to his knees to swing with clubbed rifle as the white men closed in.

The squaw had blue eyes and brown hair, and was believed to have been a white girl captured by the Indians when a child, but she could speak no English and remembered nothing of her previous associations.

A little jaunt of thirteen miles further down the trail brings us to Jacksboro where mesquite trees shade the green lawns, and where weathered yellow stone buildings predominate, some of them dating back to 1867 and the establishment of nearby Fort Richardson.

In the center of town is the Jack County courthouse, erected in 1939 on the site of an old courthouse, in which occurred the murder trials of two Kiowa chiefs in 1871. Satanta, Big Tree, and Satank had led a band of Kiowas in a particularly brutal attack on an army wagon train, and had overwhelmed the twelve teamsters, killing six and capturing one who had been wounded. The bodies were horribly mutilated and the wounded man was tortured. Five teamsters escaped and carried the news of the attack to Fort Richardson. Troops searched the plains for the raiders, but the warriors had scurried back to their reservation in the then Indian Territory. Only the three chiefs were arrested.

Satanta had boasted of being the leader of the affray, but later placed the blame on Satank and Big Tree. On the way to Jacksboro for trial Satank managed to slip the handcuffs from his wrists, and swinging them as a weapon, rushed his guards. He was quickly shot and killed.

The other two Indians were tried and

(Continued on page 90)

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The rifleman who had covered Thorsen pitched from the rocky ledge into the yawning gorge (CHAPTER I)

LONGHORN RAILS

By CHUCK MARTIN

When railroad builders and cattlemen are the victims of a preying band of outlaw rustlers and killers, Wayne Morgan rides into Calaveras Valley ready for grim six-gun action!

CHAPTER I

Empire Builders

CALAVERAS GORGE was a deep, gloomy chasm of mystery in the early hours of the Texas morning. The thunder of Deep River could be heard roaring in the twisting canyon bottom which cut off Calaveras Valley from the money markets to the north.

Creighton Blaine, railroad man and empire builder, glanced at the group of men gathered about him on a rocky shelf at the north end of the deep gorge, and his wind-rough-

ened voice boomed above the roar of the rapids in the depths below.

"Railroads and cattle work together!" the tall stocky Blaine announced dramatically, and raised his right hand. "Let her roar!" he shouted, and dropped his poised hand.

On another ledge across the gorge, a raw-boned Norwegian stood beside a pretty girl with his right arm raised. Olaf Thorsen was a hard-rock man, and an expert with explosives. Sandra Blaine, the railroad man's pretty daughter and sole heir, who had been given the honor of starting the railroad which would bring prosperity to Calaveras Valley, was gripping the plunger of a battery with both hands, waiting for the signal which would set off half a ton of dynamite.

Sandra watched the big miner's raised hand as Thorsen caught the signal from Blaine across the deep gorge. She saw Olaf catch his breath as his fingers stiffened. Then his hand started down, but instead of dropping swiftly, that big hand went limp and drooped to the miner's side.

Sandra gasped when Thorsen broke at the knees and tumbled to the rocky shelf, and at the same time she heard the belated bark of a rifle. Gripping the battery plunger with both hands, the girl bent her knees and pushed the plunger swiftly.

As her blonde head went down, something tugged the black Stetson hat from her curls. But the second bark of a rifle was drowned by the tremendous explosion which rocked the still air, and sent the echoes rolling high into the Bondrio Mountains. The high rocky walls of Gunsight Pass were thrown into the air by the force of the explosive, and the rock fill began to pile up at the north end of Calaveras Gorge.

Olaf Thorsen sat up, clutching at his left shoulder with his big right hand. He was staring at a high peak, and Sandra followed his glance. A bearded man was squinting down the barrel of a rifle which covered Thorsen, but before his finger could press trigger, a six-shooter roared throatily from the mesa above the bushwhacker's hiding place.

THE rifleman kicked convulsively and pitched from his rocky ledge into the yawning pit of the gorge. His scream was drowned by the grinding of rocks which plummeted into the deep chasm. Sandra Blaine raised her head and stared at a tall masked man sitting a magnificent black stallion on the very edge of the high mesa.

The wounded Norwegian was also staring at the tall rider with a look of gratitude and surprise in his deep-set blue eyes.

"I tank God," he whispered hoarsely. "It bane the Masked Rider."

The tall horseman touched the stallion with a blunted spur and rode behind a stand of creosote bush. Sandra Blaine went to her knees beside Thorsen and gently unbuttoned his heavy wool shirt.

"I will help," a guttural voice offered quietly.

Sandra whirled to see a tall Indian—plainly a Yaqui from his features and dress—coming from the brush. The Yaqui's black hair hung to his shoulders, and was caught by a crimson bandeau.

"Who are you?" Sandra asked tremulously.

"Me Blue Hawk," the Indian said quietly, and nodded gravely at Thorsen as he knelt beside the wounded man.

Sandra watched as the Indian examined the angry wound and poured some brown liquid on a cloth plug which he inserted into the wound. Like every one else in the great Southwest, she had heard the legendary tales of the Masked Rider and of his Indian companion, Blue Hawk, and now that she was glimpsing them both it was easy to believe the stories she had heard that although the Masked Rider was an outlaw himself he always fought on the side of law and order. Undoubtedly he had saved Olaf Thorsen from certain death.

"You are not hurt, senorita?" Blue Hawk asked quietly, as he finished his first-aid on Thorsen. "I see your hat jump from your head."

Sandra Blaine caught her breath sharply. For the first time she realized how close she had been to death. Only that sudden lowering of her head as she had bent her knees to force down the plunger on the battery box had saved her.

"He meant to kill me," she whispered, with a shudder. "Could it have been Brace Jordan?"

"You mean the outlaw they say is in this neighborhood, senorita?"

Up the Evil Traitors Who Stalk the Bondrios!

Sandra nodded at Blue Hawk. "Yes—yes," she said shakily. "He runs a band of rustlers and bandits here in the Bondrio Mountains, and he does not want the railroad to go through to Calaveras."

The brush moved slightly at the edge of the clearing, but the girl was facing the deep chasm and did not see. A tall man wearing a mask was listening intently above the roar of the sliding rocks from the crumpling pass, seen only by Blue Hawk.

"Railroad?" the Indian repeated slowly.

"There are thousands of fat cattle in Calmesa above, and two mounted men crashed into the brush. Blue Hawk stiffened slightly, but he smiled when he saw the slight movement of the brush tops which told him that the Masked Rider had changed his position. Then a stalward young cowboy and an older man were racing to join Sandra Blaine and Thorsen.

The cowboy slid to a stop and stabbed at the holstered six-shooter on his right leg. The weapon slid clear of leather and covered the Yaqui.

"Talk fast, redskin!" the cowboy ordered

WAYNE MORGAN

averas Valley," Sandra Blaine explained. "There is a trail through the gorge, but the cattle are gaunted when they arrive at the rail-head at Longhorn. That's the town at the north end of the gorge, and my father is building a spur road with the help of the cattlemen."

"We build bridges," Olaf Thorsen put in, speaking laboriously. "First we blast the rocks for to make the fills. By Yoe, for why dose bandits shoot me I tole you!"

The ring of shod hoofs came from the grimly. "We've got yuh dead to rights! Why'd yuh plug this hombre?"

Sandra Blaine stepped in front of Blue Hawk and faced the angry cowboy.

"Put up your gun, Dave Fuller!" she ordered sharply. "And you too, Tillman Burdock. This is Blue Hawk, who rides with the Masked Rider—and the Masked Rider just saved Olaf's life!"

DAVE FULLER was a tall and ruggedly handsome young cowboy, not more

than twenty-four years old, though he had the look of a seasoned veteran. His rugged jaw lost some of its truculence at mention of the Masked Rider's name, as if he also had memories of something the masked man might have done at some time.

Fuller's companion, Tillman Burdock, was a stocky, solid cattleman of fifty-odd. He holstered his pistol with a little nod of his graying head.

"The Masked Rider, yuh say?" he asked slowly. "I wonder what he's doin' in these parts?"

"Riding," Blue Hawk answered coolly. "I go now."

"Just a minute, Indian," young Fuller said bluntly. "How do we know you and this Masked Rider ain't in with Brace Jordan and his pack of skulkin' wolves that's doin' so much devilment hereabouts?"

"You do not know, Senor," Blue Hawk said quietly.

"Yuh better ride with us," Fuller said coldly. "Creighton Blaine and old Bob Lee will want to chin some with yuh!"

"Good idea," Burdock seconded. "If the Masked Rider is playin' a lone hand hereabouts, mebbe he will throw in with us."

Blue Hawk keenly watched the two men who kept their right hands close to their holsters. The only weapon the Indian had in sight was the long-bladed hunting knife on the left side of his fringe buckskin pants. He smiled slowly as the brush parted behind the two cattlemen.

"Do not move, senors," he warned quietly. "The Masked Rider is here to tell you he works with no man who is against law and order. He always works alone, also. Is it not so, Senor?"

Burdock and Fuller frowned as the Indian glanced over their head to a point behind them. They turned slowly, to stare at the tall masked man who was watching them with a gun in his hand, pointing carelessly in their direction.

The Masked Rider nodded, without speaking. He motioned for Blue Hawk to withdraw, then stepped back into the brush himself. Then came the thud of hoofs as Burdock and Fuller stared at the spot where the Masked Rider had stood, and the next moment Sandra was waving at a pair of riders on the mesa high above the shelf.

"Talkative cuss, that Masked Rider," Burdock remarked finally, but Dave Fuller didn't seem to hear him. He was too busy glaring at Sandra Blaine, and jealousy was plain in his narrowed gray eyes.

"Him and Brace Jordan," the cowboy said angrily. "Both of 'em outlaws, and you know birds of a feather flock together!"

"Help Olaf to his horse," Sandra said quietly.

Turning quickly, she strode through the brush to a pocket where she had tethered her own horse. . . .

In a copse of post-oak high up on the mesa where the Masked Rider stopped when he and Blue Hawk were safely out of sight from below, the masked man dismounted and set about making a quick transformation. He removed his long black cape and mask, and handed the bridle reins of the black stallion to Blue Hawk.

Now, as he clapped a worn sombrero on his black head, he looked like a working cowboy in the gray flannel shirt and wool pants he had worn beneath the long cape. A pair of black-butted six-shooters were in the open holsters at his thighs. And now, indeed, he had become a cowboy—Wayne Morgan, the masked man's alter ego, but a man who had never been even vaguely connected with the Masked Rider's activities, though Morgan did so much to further the masked man's purposes.

"There's work for Wayne Morgan to do here, Hawk," the Masked Rider remarked grimly to his Yaqui companion as he mounted a stocky roan horse which the Indian had earlier tethered on the mesa. "I'm goin' to look over the ground and see what's bein' pulled around here—and why. If I can get away without causin' suspicion, I'll meet yuh tonight at the natural stone bridge across Deep River. Yuh'll remember us crossin' there."

Blue Hawk nodded his understanding. He was always ready to accept without questioning whatever came up, and as ready to lend a hand to his trail companion. For although he knew nothing of the Masked Rider's early life, knew nothing of the man before the time he had thrown in his own lot with him to ride the trail as companion to a Robin Hood outlaw, he knew that this man to whom he was so loyal was not living the dual life of Masked Rider and Wayne Morgan, wandering waddy, without good purpose.

The Yaqui knew the value of the masked man's Morgan rôle. As Wayne Morgan, a tophand with both horses and cattle, he was

The snaky loop darted forward like a thing alive, and snatched at the gleaming gun (CHAPTER III)

able to meet men of the range on their own ground, and always hold down a job. He was even able to change his voice for his waddy rôle so that no one who had ever heard the Masked Rider speak would for an instant connect him with Wayne Morgan through their speaking voices.

BLUE HAWK led the black stallion away as Wayne Morgan began his return journey to the spot where Olaf Thorsen had been wounded. There were more men gathered there now, for shortly Morgan could see the group across the gorge, and he recalled the references of the cowman named Burdock to a cattleman he had called old Bob Lee.

Morgan had also worked out part of the puzzle in his orderly mind. Sandra Blaine had said that her father, Creighton Blaine, was building a spur railroad into Calaveras Valley with the aid of the cattlemen, and that, of course, would be the line of contention.

Morgan's blue eyes narrowed as he remembered the reference to Brace Jordan, the handsome outlaw who preyed on the cattlemen and freighters of the broad fertile valley.

He had seen Brace Jordan only the day before, riding with eight men. Morgan and Blue Hawk had been riding along the rim of the gorge when the Indian's keen ears had detected the ping of hoofs on rock. They had hidden in a post-oak bosque while the outlaws had ridden past on some business of their own, and he had recognized the outlaw leader at once, from descriptions he had heard.

Brace Jordan was handsome and strong, as people said. Morgan remembered the outlaw as an inch or two above six feet tall, wide in the shoulders, lean in the flanks, and wearing a brace of well-oiled Peacemaker .45 six-shooters. He had spoken once, as he and his men had ridden by the hiding place, but Morgan would never forget the deep vibrant voice of the boss outlaw.

The dust from the great explosion had settled when Morgan skirted the mesa where Olaf Thorsen had been wounded. The timber was thick enough to afford concealment, and Morgan cut around the place where the rock fill had settled to rest. Several minutes later he was guided to the group of men by the sound of loud voices. He reined in his roan to listen. Dave Fuller was speaking to Sandra Blaine's father.

"Looks suspicious to me, Mr. Blaine," the cowboy was declaring. "We know Brace Jordan will do anything to keep us from buildin' this spur railroad. He had Olaf shot, and the killer meant to get Sandra at the same time!"

"But he didn't, thanks to the Masked Rider," Morgan heard Sandra Blaine say forcefully. "Your suspicions about that masked man are unfounded, Dave."

"I'd like to talk some to this Masked Rider," Morgan heard a deep voice say quietly. "From what I gather, he's been on the dodge himself for quite a while. If anybody can clip Brace Jordan's wings, it ought to be the Masked Rider."

"I'd like for to hire some good gunhands, myself," a wind-roughened voice spoke up vehemently. "We're going to need some fightin' help to get the Longhorn Railroad through the gorge!"

CHAPTER II

Demonstration

WAYNE MORGAN nudged his roan with a blunted spur and rode out of cover. Several men turned to face him with hands on their holstered guns, but Morgan held up his right hand in the unspoken sign of peace.

"Good mornin', men," he said quietly. "The name is Wayne Morgan, and I heard it might do me some good to look you fellers up and have a powwow. I'm lookin' for work—at fightin' pay."

His blue eyes studied each face and stopped when they came to a stocky old cattleman with a gray beard. This would be Bob Lee, of course, for he had heard the man speak, and his Southern accent was unmistakable.

Lee was studying the horse and rider, and each bit of rigging and gear. His was a fighting face with a humorous mouth, and steady piercing brown eyes, and Morgan estimated the man's age to be about fifty-five. He was squat and compactly built.

"I'm Bob Lee of the Circle L," the old cattleman introduced himself courteously. "This gentleman here is Creighton Blaine, railroad builder and cattleman from over Austin way. And this young feller is Dave Fuller who runs his own little spread under

the D Bar F iron. The lean gent yonder is Joe Dunstan of the J Bar D. Tillman Burdock, standin' alongside him, owns the Box B, and the lady is Blaine's daughter, Miss Sandra."

Morgan removed his Stetson and bowed to Sandra Blaine.

"Howdy," he acknowledged the introductions to the others, and grinned when he saw Dave Fuller frown. "What was the big boom I heard about an hour ago?" Morgan asked Lee. "Wasn't it somewheres hereabouts? I kind of thought so."

"We're aimin' to build a spur railroad to link up Longhorn with Calaveras down in the valley," Bob Lee explained, then frowned. "Beginnin' to look like we might need some help, though, before we're through. Reckon what you heard was when we set off a big charge of powder to make a fill here at the north end of the gorge." He stopped to study Morgan's rugged face intently. "Say—on yore way here did yuh see anything of a masked rider on a big black stud hoss?" he asked hopefully. "With mebbe a redskin sidin' him?"

Morgan shook his head. "Sounds like the Masked Rider and the Yaqui they call Blue Hawk," he answered quietly. "If he's on yore side, yuh won't need any more help."

"Where you from, Morgan?" Dave Fuller interrupted sharply, as he glared at Morgan.

Wayne Morgan turned slowly and drew a deep breath. In a wild country like this such questions, if asked at all, were usually asked by the law, and Fuller was no lawman. Morgan's face showed his resentment. His lips trapped together as he stared hard at the young cattleman.

"Yuh asked a right personal question," he replied slowly. "Is it any of yore business?"

Dave Fuller's face clouded with sudden anger. His right hand slapped down for the gun on his hip, but the weapon did not clear leather. For even as it moved he saw that Wayne Morgan moved his right hand down and up so fast that his fingers were a brown blur in the morning sun. His gun hissed clear of leather with thumb notching back the hammer on the end of his lightning draw, and the black muzzle pointed at Dave Fuller's swelling chest.

"Is it any of yore business?" Morgan repeated coldly.

Dave Fuller turned pale with anger. His hands began to tremble as the older men watched the little play.

"Professional gunhawk!" Fuller whispered scathingly. "I pass for this time!"

"There won't be a next time if you make another pass at me," Morgan warned quietly, but his deep voice was husky with a trace of anger of his own.

"Can yuh shoot as good as yuh draw, hombre?" old Bob Lee asked Morgan with a little chuckle, to break the tension. "Could you mebbe drop that buzzard pinned up yonder again the wind?"

Wayne Morgan did not glance up. If this were a trick to get him off guard, he knew the answers. Every other man, including Fuller, glanced up to where a great black buzzard was floating in the turquoise sky. As Fuller averted his eyes, Morgan glanced up swiftly. Then the gun in his hand tilted up and roared savagely.

THE group of men jerked at the explosion, and Dave Fuller's jaw dropped. The buzzard dissolved in a flutter of feathers, and when Fuller glanced quickly at Morgan, the smoking six-shooter was back in leather on Morgan's right thigh.

"Dogies!" Dave Fuller muttered hoarsely. "By dogies!"

He squared his wide shoulders and took a step forward. A shamed grin broke across his tanned face as he humbly offered his right hand to Morgan.

"It's none of my business where yuh come from, hombre," he said bluntly. "I'm sayin' I'm sorry, and I'd like to be friends. Overlook me actin' like a peevish button, Morgan?"

Wayne Morgan smiled and took the extended hand in a grip of steel.

"Spoken like a man, Fuller," he answered heartily. "I can tell you one thing, and yuh can easy find it out for a fact—I'm not on the dodge, and I'd like to help put the railroad through to Calaveras."

"Yuh're hired, Morgan," Bob Lee spoke up quickly, just as Joe Dunstan wet his lips to speak. "At a hundred and fifty a month and cartridges."

Sandra Blaine came forward and offered a slim brown hand. She was dressed like a cowboy in flannel shirt and denim overalls, over which she wore light calfskins chaps.

"We'll be glad to have such help as yours, Mr. Morgan," she said in a warm, rich voice. "Dad has bought an interest in the Circle L, and since I'm his rep down here of course

I'm interested in everything that will help the range. I'm sure you will. That shooting you just did was even better than the Masked Rider."

"Yes?" Morgan queried, as he released his hand. "Did the Masked Rider do some shooting?"

"He saved my life," the girl answered gratefully. "It was this way, you see. Olaf Thorsen, a hard-rock man, had set the charges to make that fill in the gorge and I had just pushed the plunger on the battery box when an outlaw shot and wounded Olaf. He shot at me, too, then, but the Masked Rider must have shot a second sooner than he did." She added simply: "He killed the drygulcher."

Wayne Morgan carefully veiled his eyes for a moment. He was staring into the depths of the gorge where Deep River raged toward the distant Rio Grande.

"How far is it to Calaveras Valley?" he asked, making a complete change of subjects.

"Forty-two miles as the crow flies—nearly twice that far by the deer trails," Bob Lee answered. "Our main crop down there is our feeder grass, but we gaunt our stock when we make a drive to the railhead at Longhorn."

"We've got a lot of track laid on the flat places," Creighton Blaine spoke up. "Our big job will be buildin' the bridges across Deep River."

Morgan studied the big man. Blaine, he decided, would be about forty-five, and what looked to Morgan like strong bone and muscle in the man would weigh at least two hundred pounds. He wore a closely cropped mustache, had a straight, aristocratic nose and clear blue eyes which never wavered. It was plain to see where Sandra Blaine derived her good looks.

Creighton Blaine wore a heavy tweed riding suit, with a six-shooter strapped around his hips, and a fountain pen in the upper pocket of his vest. He looked like a successful business man who had earned his money.

"There's an outside interest, the Chicago syndicate, bucking us here," Creighton told Morgan. "They've got plenty of important money, but we want to keep the spur among Texas men. If we can build our spur road, every cattleman in Calaveras Valley will make money on his cattle and feed!"

"Where does Brace Jordan come into all this?" Morgan asked quietly.

"Nobody can catch up with him when he gets back in those Bondrio Mountains," Bob Lee said angrily. "He rustles our stock, robs the stages, and several times when some of us have made a hard drive through the gorge, he's robbed us of our trail-herd money. We've put a reward of five thousand on his head, but that was two years ago, and Jordan has killed four men who tried to collect the reward!"

MORGAN watched Bob Lee's face as the old cattleman talked. He liked all these cattlemen, with their love of their own country and willingness to fight for it.

"When do I start to work?" he asked Lee.

"As of this mornin'," Lee answered promptly. "After seein' you wing that buzzard, I wish yuh were twins. I've got an idea that Brace Jordan is takin' side money from the Chicago Syndicate to stop us from completin' the spur line, and yuh can make some side money of yore own if yuh get Jordan—dead or alive!"

"I'm not a bounty hunter," Morgan said with quiet dignity. "I fight for the iron that pays me my wages, and I'll do my best. How about Dave Fuller ridin' with me to hunt sign across the gorge where that outlaw was when he shot Olaf Thorsen? Then he can guide me down to the valley, and after that I can find my way around."

"Yuh shore yuh want me, Morgan?" Fuller asked eagerly.

"You'll do to ride the river with," Morgan answered warmly. "It'll be dangerous riding, but I have a plan I want to try."

"Good luck, Morgan, and you, Fuller," Creighton Blaine said heartily, and shook hands with the two men. "I have an office in Longhorn, and you can count on any help you might need from me. Now I'm getting back to town."

"We're makin' a gather for one last trail-drive," Bob Lee told Morgan. "We've got the crews workin' now in the valley, and we'll be gettin' back there now. Dave will show yuh the short-cuts, and you can work out yore plans to suit yoreself."

"I'll see you both at the Circle L," Sandra Blaine said to Morgan, and smiled at Dave Fuller. "Take care of yourselves up in those Bondrios."

Dave Fuller mounted his horse and rode alongside Morgan. The two men rode around the fill, waving at the cattlemen who were getting ready for the return trip to Calaveras Valley. Fuller went straight to the little

mesa where Olaf Thorsen had been wounded, and pointed to a rocky shelf where the outlaw had hidden.

"That Masked Rider gent did save Sandra's life," Fuller said glumly. "He set his hoss up there on the mesa rim, and then he slipped down here to cover his pard, that Yaqui Indian. I'd like to know for shore just where the Masked Rider stands in this deal!"

"From what I hear, he plays a straight game," Morgan said carelessly. "Let's ride over and circle for sign where that outlaw must have hid his hoss."

Fuller led the way, with Morgan following. Fuller pointed to some deep heel tracks, and Morgan leaned over in the saddle to study the ground. Then he put his roan up the trail and rode into a pocket of scrub oak. When Fuller came up later, Morgan was on the ground near a deep-chested horse which was tied to a springy branch. A saddle-string was over the horse's nose to prevent the animal from neighing.

Morgan was going through the saddle-bags behind the outlaw's cantle, and he took some papers just as Fuller rode into the clearing.

"Looks like a rough map," Fuller volunteered, and dismounted to look over Morgan's shoulder. "Say!" he burst out. "That's a drawin' of this gorge country, and right there's where we built a dam to give us water through the dry scrapes!"

"How far from here?" Morgan asked.

"About ten miles, up on Bondrio Mesa," Fuller explained. "It was Blaine's idea, and he built a spillway and gates. Look at these initials on the map in the bottom corner. 'B.J.' That stands for Brace Jordan, and that's a copy of one of Blaine's maps!"

"Blaine said there was big money behind that Chicago syndicate," Morgan murmured thoughtfully. "This ties Brace Jordan up with the Syndicate, and it also means that there's a traitor among the valley men."

"I can't figger who it would be," Fuller argued slowly, and Morgan could see that the cowboy was thinking hard, tallying the valley cattlemen in his mind. "Tillman Burdock was offered a lot of money to sell his spread to the Syndicate, but so were all the rest of us," Fuller explained. "We all need money, and we'd have it if we could move our steers to market in good condition."

Morgan triggered and Twine Creed jerked in the saddle as the heavy slug caught him (CHAPTER IV)

MORGAN listened and studied the papers taken from the dead outlaw's pockets.

"This hombre's name was Tom Cain," he said, after a pause. "Did you know him?"

"I knew of him," Fuller answered. "He was a tall lathy jasper about thirty-five years old. Wanted for robbery and murder. The Masked Rider could collect a thousand dollars for the mornin's work."

Morgan had started to reply when suddenly he lowered his head, moved swiftly, and threw himself sideward into the brush, calling a warning to Fuller.

"Hunt cover, Fuller!"

A rifle barked flatly just as Dave Fuller made a fast dive into the brush. Morgan had seen the brush-tops wave on a little shelf, and now his six-shooter was out and answering the rifle shot. Two quick shots and something crashed in the brush on the shelf.

"Stay down, and work over this way!" Morgan called softly to Fuller. "We'll circle around and come up on opposite sides. Keep under cover, and yore gun ready for war!"

Fuller came through the brush, and the two men started up the timbered slope. Morgan pointed for Fuller to circle around, and waited long enough for his companion to get into position. Then he started toward the rifleman's hiding place with his smoke-grimed gun ready for a shot.

A moment later he saw a man lying in the crumpled brush, staring up at the sky with sightless eyes.

"Come on down, Dave!" he called softly to Fuller. "This owlhooter is dead."

Fuller came running with his gun drawn. He stopped when he saw the man on the ground. Morgan pointed to the staring eyes.

"They don't see anything when their eyes are wide open," he explained gruffly.

Fuller hurriedly examined the corpse. "This one is Pablo Rodriguez, another of Jordan's gang, and yuh got him through the heart," he said in a low voice. "And to think I asked you for gun play back there!"

Morgan grinned at Fuller's discomfort.

"It was just a lucky shot at best," Morgan explained. "I fired into the brush and the bullet accidently found his heart. There's really nothing for you to be nervous about."

"Mebbe not," Fuller said with a shrug. "But it taught me a lesson not to go off half-cocked again with strangers. And let me tell you that killing another one of Pablo's gang won't be healthy for anybody."

CHAPTER III

Clear Cool Water

FULLER licked his lips so reminiscently as he pointed to the sketch map and showed Morgan where the cattlemen had built a dam on a high mesa that Morgan knew what was in the cowboy's mind. He was remembering cattle drives from Calaveras Valley to Longhorn, through the dry scrapes where the precious water had been allowed to run off into Deep River.

Fuller told Morgan that Creighton Blaine had suggested that the cattlemen post guards around the dam, but that the work of gathering the cattle and building the spur railroad had scraped the bottom of the man-power barrel.

Wayne Morgan studied the map and grasped the situation instantly. Brace Jordan and his owlhooters controlled the vast back reaches of the wild Bondrio Mountains. They had made two attempts to stop the building of bridges across the deep gorge. They would be in a position to interfere with the last big drive of shipping steers, and in many places, could cut off the vitally needed water at its source.

Dave Fuller placed a finger on the map where the big earthen dam was clearly defined.

"We should ride up there," he told Morgan. "It is on our way to Calaveras, and I feel uneasy about the water."

Morgan nodded thoughtfully and made a suggestion. They would separate and have two chances instead of one, and with night coming on in a country with which he was unfamiliar, a man would have more chance for success if he had eyes watching his back. Blue Hawk would provide those eyes.

"You ride up that way and see what you can find out, Dave," Morgan told Fuller. "I'll keep back a ways and slightly to the north. One man can hunt cover where two couldn't mebbe, and if I get lost from you, I'll make my way down to the valley with daylight."

Dave Fuller glanced at the deepening shadows and nodded assent. The two men made their way back to the horses, and after a brief discussion, Dave Fuller mounted and struck out through the timber.

Wayne Morgan straddled the roan and watched Dave Fuller slant up the slope and disappear. Then he struck out on a higher level to work out a plan of his own. He was sure that Brace Jordan had received a report on the activities of Wayne Morgan who would be just another gun-hung saddle-tramp to the handsome outlaw. Dave Fuller was also a marked man, but he was a seasoned veteran who knew his way through the wild gorge country.

The faint cry of a hunting catamount keened softly through the night shadows as Morgan rode across a little clearing. That was a signal to Morgan that Blue Hawk was already serving as his other eyes, and some minutes later the Yaqui rode out of the buck-brush to meet Wayne Morgan. For years that hunting cry had been their private signal.

"Three men ride south and west, Senor," Blue Hawk told Morgan quietly. "Senor" was the only name by which the Masked Rider had been known to the Yaqui. "They follow the trail of the young cowboy you were riding with."

"That means work for the Masked Rider," Morgan answered, and stepped down from his roan horse. "You foller at a distance, Hawk, but keep out of sight."

The Indian nodded and handed the long black cloak to Morgan who had slipped a silk mask over his eyes. After donning the flowing cape, the Masked Rider changed to the black stallion, and he seemed somehow bigger on the spirited horse. With a wave of his hand, the Masked Rider rode into the young night and was soon lost to the sight of even Blue Hawk who could see better at night that most men.

Midnight, the marked man's mount, was as sure-footed as a mountain goat, and the black stallion picked his way through the deer trails which slanted toward the wide mesa. The Masked Rider knew that all these trails would lead to water, and he watched the sensitive ears of his horse as they came out on Bondrio Mesa.

Midnight suddenly pricked his ears forward and raised his head to sniff inquiringly. The Masked Rider reined the big horse in to blow while he scanned the horizon to get his bearings.

A little sigh gusted from the Masked Rider's lips as he saw what looked like an even ridge against the sky-line. That would be the earthen dam, and something was moving slowly just above the high bank—a look-out riding around the big dam. The Masked Rider started his horse and rode a little to the south.

NOW he could hear the sound of water spilling into a reservoir, as the springs added to the precious store behind the man-made barrier. Midnight was walking like a great cat, and making no sound on the loamy earth surrounding the big fill.

The Masked Rider came to a well-defined path which he knew would lead directly to the east wall of the dam. Now all his senses were alert and tuned to catch the slightest noise. He dismounted when the murmur of gruff voices whispered down the wind. Looping his bridle-reins over the saddle-horn, he spoke softly to the black stallion and slid noiselessly into the trail-side brush above the deeply-worn trail.

His sensitive fingers checked the loads in his gun as he worked his way forward like a hunting brave. The voices grew louder, and the Masked Rider stopped to listen. Words came plainly.

"This saddle-tramp who signed on with the Circle L," the voice queried. "What became of him?"

"Morgan can take care of hisself," a voice answered defiantly, and the Masked Rider drew a deep breath when he recognized it as Dave Fuller's.

Now he knew that Brace Jordan's men had tricked Fuller into a trap, and he also knew that the sentry at the top of the dam was watching for Morgan, who had been seen riding with young Dave Fuller.

"Sam Patch will take care of Morgan," the voice that had first spoken boasted confidently. "He'll come ridin' down that plain trail lookin' for you. We don't like outsiders hornin' into a closed deal, and Brace will want to ask you a few questions after Sam takes care of yore new pard!"

The Masked Rider smiled in the darkness and began to inch his way forward. He rounded a little bend and went into a crouch to keep his head below the brush. Three men were sitting in front of a rough shack of boards and logs, and one man was wrapped up with a catch-rope.

The Masked Rider recognized Dave Fuller from the set of the cowboy's shoulders. The gruff-spoken man was a tall hombre dressed in the rough garb of a working cowhand. The man with him was smaller, but power-

fully built, and he sported a set of handle-bar mustaches on his long upper lip.

"Yuh'll never get Morgan, Joe Turner!" Fuller was telling the tall man. "I rode into yore trap like yuh said, but it'll be different with Wayne Morgan."

"It won't be no different," the man called Turner contradicted. "If he gets past Sam Patch, Twine Creed here will drop a loop over yore salty pard just like he did for you! He don't miss!"

The Masked Rider could see better now as the stars shed a faint silvery light across the face of the dam. "Twine" Creed was playing idly with a rawhide lariat which moved under his supple fingers like a snake. Creed was sitting on his heels to the right of Morgan, while Joe Turner was resting with his back against a small tree.

Dave Fuller turned his head slightly and glanced at the tops of the trail-side brush. The Masked Rider stopped instantly, his eyes watchful to see if the two outlaws had also discovered his presence. Fuller quickly averted his glance, and the Masked Rider drew the right-hand gun from his open holster.

"I'd like to get that Morgan hombre in my twine," Creed said, in a thin rasping voice. "Mebbe he'd try to make a run, and I could hip-lean against the rawhide and bust his neck."

The Masked Rider started tc move forward again through the pungent brush. At last he was behind the tree where Joe Turner rested his broad back. Turner had a rifle across his knees as he watched Twine Creed manipulate his rawhide rope.

A six-shooter rose and fell with stunning force behind the tall outlaw as the Masked Rider used the gun for a club. As Joe Turner grunted and fell forward, a stern quiet voice told Twine Creed to reach for the sky, and the Masked Rider stepped from behind the fallen outlaw with his gun menacing the roper.

Twine Creed straightened his shoulders and his right hand moved with startling speed. The snaky loop darted forward like a thing alive, and snatched at the gleaming gun in the Masked Rider's right hand.

The loop caught the Masked Rider's wrist, but before Twine Creed could take up his slack, the Masked Rider made a tremendous leap and jumped the roper who was still on his haunches. A thudding left fist crashed against Creed's bony jaw, and the mustachioed outlaw fell face-forward.

THE Masked Rider flicked the rope from his wrist and rubbed the angry burn on his flesh. A thin wavering call of the hunting catamount came from above the dam, and the Masked Rider took a quick step and melted with the deeper shadows.

A horse was coming down the packed trail from the north, and the Masked Rider pulled the rawhide rope toward him. It slithered across the ground with a sibilant hiss, and Dave Fuller sat quiet and remained silent.

Sam Patch rode boldly into the clearing toward the three men in front of the rude shack. Something must have warned him that all was not well, for he made a sudden stab at the holstered gun on his long right leg.

The Masked Rider flipped the captured rawhide rope with a Hooley Ann cast from the side, and the loop shot straight for the mounted outlaw's head. The noose fell true just as Sam Patch was making his draw, but he was jerked sideward from the saddle before the gun could clear leather.

Sam Patch landed heavily on the boulder-strewn path, flattened out on the ground, and made no attempt to arise. The Masked Rider threw a half-hitch along the supple rope and stepped into the clear with his gun in hand. Crossing quickly to Dave Fuller, he threw off the coils which bound the cowboy, twitched loose a piggin' string, and then stepped back and away.

Dave Fuller started to voice his thanks, but the Masked Rider stopped him curtly. He told Fuller to find his horse and guns and ride off. Fuller stooped over Joe Turner and retrieved his six-shooter from the lanky outlaw's gun-belt.

"My horse is down yonder in a pole corral behind the shack," Fuller told his masked rescuer. "I'll get it and ride off with you!"

Again the warning cry of the mountain lion came from the mesa, and the Masked Rider held up his hand for silence. Faintly against the sighing of a southern wind, the sounds of racing hoof-beats could be plainly heard.

"Hit saddle and ride south, cowboy," the Masked Rider told Fuller gruffly.

"But what are you goin' to do?" Fuller asked, and then he realized that he was talking to himself.

The Masked Rider had again melted with the shadows, and Joe Turner was beginning

to stir restlessly. Fuller cocked his gun as he backed away, and a pair of keen eyes watched until the cowboy had reached his horse in the pole corral. When the sounds of Fuller's horse told the Masked Rider that Fuller was obeying instructions, the masked man retraced his steps to the pocket where he had left the black stallion.

The Masked Rider whistled softly and climbed his saddle when the big black stallion answered his call. Now the hoof-beats were louder on the trail, and as the Masked Rider rode through the thinning trees, he was joined by Blue Hawk.

"It is that one they call Brace Jordan, Senor," the Yaqui informed the Masked Rider quietly. "He rides with a dozen men, and they think they have Wayne Morgan and the other cowboy in a trap."

"Our work is done here for tonight, Hawk," the Masked Rider answered and, touching the stallion with his spur, he rode through the trees where the shadows were deepest.

Blue Hawk followed on his gray horse, maintaining a discreet silence. When they were below the mesa and once more in the rugged hills, the Masked Rider told Blue Hawk of his plan to ride down to the Calaveras Valley.

"There is one named Carter," Blue Hawk said gravely. "I heard Jordan call him by name. Senor, he is a fighter, and he will start trouble with Wayne Morgan."

The Masked Rider grunted and rode into a brush pocket surrounded by jagged rocks. He removed the silk mask and doffed the long black cloak, handing them to the faithful Indian.

"Hide, well, amigo," he told Blue Hawk, as he mounted the saddle on his stout roan horse. "Yuh'll know where and how to reach me if the need is urgent."

Black Hawk nodded and watched Wayne Morgan ride out of the hiding place and head toward the valley in the south.

Morgan settled his twin guns in the holsters and smiled grimly as he thought of the three outlaws at the east wall of the dam, and the story they would tell to Brace Jordan. In the distance he could feel the moisture-laden wind as it blew across the clear cool water behind the great dam.

CHAPTER IV

A Challenge

DAWN awoke with startling suddenness in the mountain desert. Wayne Morgan had gone to bed "standing up", by merely removing his high-heeled boots. Nature speaks a language of her own to those who sleep on the ground, and she sharpens the senses of sight, sound, and an awareness which is denied to a less hardy breed of men.

Morgan awoke with every sense alert, and his right hand went instinctively to the gun on his leg. The saw-tooth hills were steeped in the blackness of night one moment; the next they were bathed in a clear golden light from the rising sun. Morgan pressed an ear to the ground, smiled slowly, and moved swiftly away from the blanket which had served for both bed and cover.

A horseman was coming from the east at a springy trot to tell that the horse was limbering up its muscles preparatory for the day's work. The rider would pass the little shelf below the wooded mesa where Morgan

[*Turn page*]

had made up his sleep. Far below in the twisting gorge the roar of Deep River provided a murmuring overtone to the chirp of birds and the drone of insects.

Whoever the unknown rider might be, Wayne Morgan told himself that the stranger was getting an early start. Then he saw a deep-chested mountain horse emerge from the brush, and the rider wore a pair of cow-horn mustaches on his long upper lip.

Wayne Morgan recognized Twine Creed before he saw the pair of rawhide ropes on the outlaw's saddle-horn. Creed rode like a man who knows where he is going and what he is going to do when he gets there.

The outlaw took one of his ropes and built a small loop with agile fingers. Creed's head was cocked a trifle to the side and, following the outlaw's example, Morgan bent his own head to listen.

Another horse was coming across the little mesa, traveling from east to west. Morgan reasoned that if Twine Creed had intentions against the unsuspecting rider, the second man must be an enemy to Brace Jordan's pack of trail wolves.

Creed backed his horse into the deep brush and held his right arm ready for a throw. Without knowing why he knew, Morgan was positive that the second rider would be young Dave Fuller. Calaveras couldn't be more than ten miles to the southwest, and Fuller was heading for the little valley town.

Not more than fifty yards separated Morgan from Creed's hiding place, and as Morgan watched, the ears of a horse poked over the brush.

Then Dave Fuller was riding down the trail toward the trap, and Morgan remembered what he had heard Creed say the night before. If he got his noose around a man's neck and hip-leaned against the rope, that man in the loop would get a broken neck.

Morgan acted quickly, but Twine Creed acted at the same time. The roper made his cast just as Morgan stepped out of the brush and shouted a stern command.

"Drop that catch-rope, hombre!"

Twine Creed's hand was already in motion. His loop shot straight and true for Dave Fuller's head, but Morgan's warning had made Fuller dodge in the saddle. The noose dropped over his head and around his arms. Twine Creed was a tie-fast man in the saddle, and he gigged his horse with a spur to drag his catch from the range-worn kak.

Morgan's rugged face hardened as he carefully lined his sights and triggered the gun in his steady right hand. Twine Creed jerked in the saddle as the heavy slug caught him high in the right shoulder, but his horse was moving away to take up the slack.

Dave Fuller spurred his own horse to go with the rope, and then his two hands caught the loop and slipped it quickly over his head. The noose fell over a piñon stump and tightened as Twine Creed spurred viciously for a getaway.

Two jumps of the outlaw's horse tightened the rope and the third jump swung the horse around and snapped Twine Creed from saddle. The outlaw landed flat on his back with the wheels of his spurs whirring angrily. And when he sat up groggily, Twine Creed was looking into the smoke-grimed muzzle of Wayne Morgan's six-shooter.

"Howdy," Morgan said lazily. "It didn't take yuh long to spend the night wherever yuh spent it. Keep that left hand high while I draw yore stinger."

MORGAN reached down and took the .45 six-shooter from the wounded outlaw's buscadero holster. Dave Fuller rode up just in time to hear Creed's startled ejaculation.

"Yuh're Morgan! I thought it was that blasted Masked Rider again!"

"Oh?" Morgan murmured. "Yuh had a run-in with the Masked Rider?"

"Howdy, Morgan," Fuller interrupted. "I'll say he did. Him and two of his pards trapped me last night up near the big dam. They was fixin' to take me to Brace Jordan when the Masked Rider came from nowhere and bought chips in the game. They'd have had both of us if yuh'd stayed with me. Where was yuh last night?"

"Ridin' around," Morgan answered vaguely, and returned his attention to the groaning outlaw. "Yuh're one of Brace Jordan's gang," he accused. "Seein' that this buzzard meant to break yore neck, Dave, he's all yores."

"Yuh should have drilled him center," Fuller complained. "Now we will have to take him to Calaveras with us, and hold him for the law."

"Yuh won't hold me long," Creed snarled viciously. "Brace Jordan will take that town apart as soon as he gets the word!"

"Get his hoss and boost him to the saddle," Morgan told Fuller. "We better be gettin' along before that boss owlhooter starts look-

in' for this curly wolf."

Twine Creed complained that his wound was bleeding, and Morgan paused long enough to give him some first aid and to bandage the wound. Then Dave Fuller led up the outlaw's horse, boosted Creed to the worn saddle, and told the outlaw that they could be in Calaveras in an hour or so if he didn't try to make any more trouble, and that if he did, he would only be delaying himself on the way to a sawbones.

Fuller rode in the lead with the outlaw following, and Wayne Morgan brought up the drag as they rode down a steep slant to the valley floor. Morgan watched with interest as they rode past flat places where section-hands had already laid a pair of gleaming steel rails, and Fuller explained that twenty miles of road-bed had already been prepared.

"It's four miles from that next cut into town," Fuller told Morgan. "Tim Clancy is section boss, and we can send a message ahead on a hand-car. Yonder comes Tim now."

A short, broad-shouldered oldster waddled up and raised his hand in greeting to Fuller. Dave Fuller introduced Morgan and explained that Twine Creed was an outlaw, and a prisoner.

"Shure, and ye should have finished yer snake-killin' when ye started it," the little foreman told Morgan bluntly. "I'll be afther sendin' the hand-car into town to tell old Bob Lee and the boys. But unless ye hang that murderous spalpeen on a handy tree, we'll be havin' Brace Jordan and his riders down here tryin' a jail-break!"

Twine Creed lost some of his bravado as the three started through the cut to town. A hand-car raced away, pumped by two husky men, and when Dave Fuller rode into the little valley town a half-hour later, a group of cattlemen were waiting at the end of the long dusty street.

Bob Lee and Joe Dunstan greeted Fuller and Morgan, stared at the prisoner, and asked Morgan why he hadn't finished what he had started. Morgan replied that he was not a cold killer, and dismounted to stretch his legs. A wide-shouldered man pushed through the small crowd, spread his powerful legs, and stared at Wayne Morgan with no attempt to conceal his hostility.

Old Bob Lee made the introduction before Morgan saw the truculent stranger.

"Wayne Morgan, make yuh acquainted with Burleigh Carter, who lets on to rep for the Syndicate people."

"Howdy, Carter," Morgan acknowledged the introduction, then looked closer at the scowling syndicate man.

Carter's nose had been broken, one ear was swollen and distorted, to tell of many a battle in the prize-ring. He also wore a pair of six-shooters in crossed gun-belts around thick hips, and his hands were like hickory mauls.

"So you're Morgan," Carter grunted. "Hired gun-swift from what I hear."

WAYNE MORGAN'S eyes narrowed slightly, and his lips tightened. Then he nodded his well-shaped head as he read sign of his own.

"Yeah," he agreed. "And you're a prize-fighter, a has-been wrestler, and fairly fast with a shootin' iron yoreself."

"Has-been, he says," Carter repeated. "Mebbe yuh'd like to scuffle some to find out how much I've forgot!"

"Not this mornin'," Morgan answered with a careless shrug, as he turned to old Bob Lee. "This outlaw is Twine Creed, Mr. Better wrap the juzgado around him until the sheriff rides in to pick him up."

"What's the charge agin him?" Carter demanded loudly. "I'll have my lawyer give bail for his release!"

"No bail," Lee answered quietly. "Tweed is wanted five hundred dollars worth for robbin' the mails, and we'll hold him for the outside Law."

"Hey, Thompson!" Carter called to a little man who was coming toward the gathering. "I've got legal business for yuh!"

"That's Jediah Thompson, the town lawyer," Fuller whispered to Morgan. "He's workin' for the Syndicate, and tricky as a pet coon."

Jediah Thompson was a man of small stature, not more than five-feet-five, and in his middle fifties. His thin face was the color of old parchment, and his little brown eyes were like polished agate, behind thick-lensed spectacles.

"Good morning, gentlemen," the lawyer said unctuously, and faced Burleigh Carter. "You require my legal services?" he asked importantly.

"This prisoner is Twine Creed," Carter explained. "Morgan and Fuller brought him to town, and Lee allows he'll hold Creed without bail. Yuh ought to have an angle."

"This man needs a doctor," Thompson said curtly. "I'll take him down to Dr. White's office, and we can discuss his case later."

"Just a minute, Jed," Bob Lee interrupted. "I also happen to be constable here when same is needed. I'll take Creed to the jail, and Doc White can work on him there."

" 'The quality of mercy is not strained'," the lawyer quoted dramatically. "Parole him in my care, and I'll be responsible for his appearance in court!"

"That's talkin'," Carter applauded. "Anybody got any objections?" He stared hard at Wayne Morgan.

"Yeah," Morgan accepted the challenge. "Looks to me like Bob Lee is what law there is in Calaveras, and what he says goes. I winged this owlhooter, and he goes to jail!"

Burleigh Carter threw back his shoulders, clenched his big fists, and faced Morgan in a fighting crouch.

"Looks like it's you and me, Morgan," he said in a rasping voice. "How do yuh want it?"

Wayne Morgan studied the fighting face for a moment as the crowd waited for his reactions. Carter was going to force a showdown, and he was confident of his own ability.

"If yuh're lookin' for trouble, start the play," Morgan told Carter. "I always take care of myself, and I don't wear my hardware for pretty!"

"So it's that way," Carter sneered. "Yuh're askin' for trouble all right!"

A strange light glittered in his little blue eyes as he settled his boots for balance. He was an all-around fighting man, and he was getting paid to do a job.

Wayne Morgan dropped his right hand down with careless grace and practised speed. His fingers wrapped around the handle of his six-shooter which hissed from the holster like a thing alive. Carter had started his draw, but he was caught flat-footed with his .45 still in leather when Morgan clicked back the hammer of his drawn gun as a warning.

Wayne Morgan didn't say anything—just covered the burly bully with his smoke-grimed six-shooter. Carter wet his lips, dropped his hand away from the gun, and laughed nervously.

"Just testin' yuh out," he said with a mirthless laugh, and quickly changed the conversation to draw attention away from his own discomfiture. "Take Creed on down to yore jail, Lee," he told the old cattleman. "And don't forget that every man is entitled to his day in court!"

"Thanks," Lee grunted. "That's what we've been maintainin' all along, but you figgered to run our town Chicago-fashion. Yuh're lucky Morgan didn't plug yuh when you made that fool play. I wouldn't try it again if I was you."

Carter threw back his head and laughed loudly. Then he walked up to Morgan and offered his hand.

"No hard feelin's, Morgan," he said jovially.

Wayne Morgan stared at the hand and shrugged lightly.

"Let it ride that away," he said bluntly. "But I only shake hands with my friends."

Carter dropped his hand and turned to Jediah Thompson to cover his embarrassment.

"Represent Creed, and send the bill to the Syndicate," he told the lawyer. "I'll see yuh in yore office before noon!"

CHAPTER V

Cattlemen's Association

BOB LEE faced a group of valley cattlemen in the big living room of the Circle L ranchhouse. Wayne Morgan had met all these members of the Cattlemen's Association, and he was listening attentively as they talked among themselves.

Joe Dunstan and his son Dan, who was about the same age as Dave Fuller, were talking to Tillman Burdock who operated the Box B. The Dunstans owned the big J Bar D outfit. Till Burdock was stocky and stolid, and in his early fifties. Joe Dunstan was tall and slender, and his son Dan was a second edition of his fighting sire.

"We don't feel right about Burleigh Carter stayin' on yore place, Joe," Morgan heard Burdock say to the elder Dunstan, and Morgan pricked up his ears.

Dunstan turned slowly and looked long at Burdock before he spoke thoughtfully.

"Mebbe it's because we can watch Carter," he answered, and then Bob Lee called the meeting to order.

"Attention, men," Lee said loudly. "All of us here belong to the Association, and we aim to build us a railroad. We are gatherin' our shippin' steers for one last drive, and we're about ready to start."

"What are we waitin' for?" Till Burdock asked, as Lee paused to take a deep breath.

"We've a job of work to do first," the old cattleman answered slowly. "Dave Fuller and Morgan have just come down out of the Bondrios, and they had some trouble back up there near the big dam. A dozen of us are goin' to ride up there before we start the drive just to make shore Brace Jordan don't cut our water off!"

A buzz of voices greeted Lee's announcement. The cattlemen had begun to settle guns in their holsters when Till Burdock rose to his feet.

"We can't spare the men away from the drive," Burdock declared vehemently. "We've got around six thousand head of fat steers down on the holdin' grounds, and we've got to get 'em through the gorge to Longhorn for shipment east!"

Sandra Blaine who had been talking to Dave Fuller stood up quickly. She motioned to another pretty girl who was talking to young Dan Dunstan.

"Rosemary Lee and I will help with the cattle drive," Sandra Blaine offered. "That will release Dan and Dave, and Wayne Morgan makes three. Everything depends on gettin' our cattle through to market, and Mr. Morgan says we must move quickly if we are to do that."

Till Burdock and Joe Dunstan both turned to look at Morgan who was watching Sandra Blaine's eager face. It was Burdock who again spoke first.

"Let's hear from Morgan," he suggested. "For a feller that's new in the neighborhood, he seems to have plenty of suggestions."

"I'm only a hired hand," Morgan answered, without getting up. "I'll try to earn my pay."

"Yuh've already earned it," Bob Lee spoke up quickly. "What's yore plan, Morgan? We'd like to know how to beat that syndicate and those outlaws at the same time."

Wayne Morgan stretched slowly to his feet and studied the stern faces of the valley cattlemen. They were rich in beef, but poor in money and, as Burdock had pointed out, he was new to Calaveras Valley.

"Water," Morgan began quietly. "Without water in the dry scrapes, that trail herd will gaunt up and lose good grass-fed flesh. If Brace Jordan should blow up yore dam, you men would lose a lot of money. And Jordan means to destroy the big dam before yuh can make yore drive!"

"Yuh seem to know a lot about Jordan," Joe Dunstan said thoughtfully, and Till Burdock nodded agreement.

Morgan frowned and started to sit down, then he changed his mind and spoke to old Bob Lee.

"I do know somethin' about Jordan," he answered quietly. "Dave Fuller and I had trouble with an outlaw, and we found a map on his body. Then Dave was captured by the outlaws, and you know about his rescue. Give me six men to ride with me, and we'll try to save yore water while the rest of yuh start pushin' the herd through the gorge."

"Count on me and Dave Fuller!" young Dan Dunstan shouted. "Olaf Thorsen wants to ride, and I can get Charley Bowie and Eddie Frane. It's about time we had a showdown with Brace Jordan and his pack of wolves, and I'm behind Wayne Morgan all the way!"

"Young hotheads," Till Burdock grunted, but Bob Lee silenced him with an upraised hand.

"That's settled," Lee declared. "Morgan and his boys will leave this afternoon and take grub along. If they need any more help, we can send a few men up there to the Bondrios before we get the drive movin' through the gorge. Do I hear any objections?"

"Some of us older heads ought to go along to ramrod that party," Till Burdock answered quickly. "I'll go if Joe Dunstan does."

"I want to keep an eye on Burleigh Carter," Dunstan said slowly. "We don't want that outlaw gang to learn of our plans!"

"Yeah," Burdock muttered. "That's what I mean."

JOE DUNSTAN was on his feet facing Burdock, and he had a hand on his holstered gun. Old Bob Lee rapped with the barrel of his own six-shooter, and young Dan Dunstan was getting ready to side his father.

"That'll do, men," Bob Lee said sternly. "Yore remarks are out of order, Till Burdock. I'd trust Joe Dunstan with everything I own. Young men for action, and both you and Joe are too old for fast company. Wayne Morgan will lead the boys, and he knows what to do!"

Wayne Morgan left the big room with Dave Fuller and Dan Dunstan. Big Olaf Thorsen was waiting in the ranch yard, and he had a gun strapped around his hips with the holster on the left side. He shook hands with Morgan as he patted the holstered gun.

"I bane left-handed," he explained, as Morgan stared at the hard-rock man's right arm which was carried in a bandanna sling. "I ride with you young fellers."

Dave Fuller called to two cowboys who were sitting on their heels by a tie-rail. Charley Bowie was a raw-boned Texas boy, slow of speech, but fast in his movements. Eddie Frane was a bandy-legged youngster with a freckled face and upturned Irish nose. Both wore six-shooters, and the pair of horses tied to the rail carried thirty-guns in the saddle-scabbards.

Fuller introduced them to Morgan and explained the plan. Neither said anything, but their faces lighted up at mention of the Jordan gang.

"Mebbe some of us won't come back," Dave Fuller said quietly, and Eddie Frane grinned.

"Who wants to live forever?" he asked.

Big Charley Bowie nodded soberly. "That's whatever," he agreed. "I'll round up a pack-hoss and brace the cooky for a supply of vittles. We'll be ready to ride out in half an hour."

Morgan nodded silently. He was thinking about the argument between Till Burdock and Joe Dunstan. Rosemary Lee came out into the yard and told Morgan she would show him the saddle-stock, and that he could have his choice of any horse in the cavvy.

Morgan thanked the pretty girl who spoke in the drawl of the deep South like her father, old Bob Lee. Morgan had roped out a stout grulla horse and was changing his riding gear when Rosemary touched his muscular arm.

"It's my fight, Mr. Morgan," the girl said earnestly. "Please, I want to go along with you-all."

"Never call a cowboy 'Mister'," Wayne Morgan told the pleading girl, with a grin, and then he shook his head. "The name is Wayne, and you can't go."

"You heard Mr. Morgan," an angry voice said behind Rosemary, and young Dan Dunstan glared at Morgan when the cowboy turned.

"I said the name was Wayne," Morgan corrected, and he matched young Dunstan's glance without flinching. "You can't go, Rosemary. We'll be out there in the hills all night, and there might be fightin'."

"Miss Lee to you," young Dunstan persisted, and the girl turned on him with flashing eyes.

"Miss Lee to you, Mr. Dunstan!" she retorted coldly, and then smiled at Dave Fuller who was also saddling a horse. "Can't I go along, Davey?" she coaxed.

Dave Fuller smiled and shook his head. "Morgan is bossin' this party," he answered quietly.

"So now it's Davey," Dan Dunstan rapped angrily. "I like that, Fuller!"

"Like it and lump it," Fuller answered with a shrug, and then Wayne Morgan interrupted.

"That'll do, Dan. There'll be plenty of fightin' to do without havin' bad blood between ourselves. Quit fightin' yore head, and start actin' like the man I know yuh can be."

Rosemary Lee watched Bob Dunstan's face, and the tall cowboy lowered his head and swallowed hard. Then a shamed grin changed his face as he stepped up and offered his right hand to Wayne Morgan.

"Sayin' I'm sorry I acted like a kid, Wayne," he murmured. "I'll be a man from now on out."

Morgan gripped the brown hand in a vise-like clasp.

"I'm shore of it, Dan," he said heartily. "You'll do to take along in any man's party."

"Dan Dunstan, I could almost kiss you," Rosemary Lee whispered softly. "Now I'll be good and stay home with Sandra. Please take care of yourself, Danny."

YOUNG DUNSTAN smiled and held Rosemary's hand a long time. He didn't say anything, and Morgan and Fuller pretended to have trouble with their saddle-slings. A horse roared into the big yard with a half-grown boy riding his spurs, and he stepped down—running as the lathered horse slid to a stop near the big corrals.

"Jail-break!" the boy shouted hoarsely. "Get the men out and come a-ridin'! That snaky Twine Creed done escaped from the jail, and he just about killed old man Tom Sherwood, the jailer!"

"Yuh should have leveled down center on that owlhooter when yuh had him under yore sights, Morgan," Dave Fuller said reproachfully, but Morgan grabbed the excited boy by an arm.

"Which way did Creed go?" he demanded.

"He grabbed a hoss at the rail behind the jail," the boy answered. "Then he lit a shuck for the Bondrios like a homin' pigeon. He'll line out for Brace Jordan's camp shore and

certain!"

"Mebbe we'll cut his sign," Morgan said quietly, but now his voice was grim and tinged with a brittle hardness. "Rosemary," he told the girl, "go up to the house and tell yore dad and the other cattlemen. Tell old Tom to circle for sign around the jail, and I'll bet my other pair of boots he'll find that Burleigh Carter or that law-shark had somethin' to do with the get-away. We're ridin' out, but we'll be seein' yuh."

Knowing that the cattlemen would want to talk over the jail-break, Morgan mounted his mouse-colored horse and rode out of the yard with a wave of the hand for the cowboys to follow him. Each had a thirty-gun or Winchester in the saddle-box under his left leg, and Wayne Morgan felt a peculiar lift of spirits as he scanned the faces of his young fighting men.

Nothing was said until the Circle L was left far behind, then Morgan spoke to Dave Fuller who was rubbing stirrups at his left side.

"Dave, you know these hills, so you take the lead and line out to come up to the big dam from the west and slightly to the north. The rest of you boys look to yore guns, for this time we're playin' for keeps. Fine yore sights, and remember that Brace Jordan has whittled notches for four men who tried to collect bounty on his scalp."

"Yuh mean we're on the hunt for Brace Jordan?" Dan Dunstan asked, and his nostrils began to flare.

Wayne Morgan frowned as he shook his head vigorously. It was true that there was a reward on the head of every man in the outlaw pack, but there was something in Morgan's nature which revolted at the thought or suggestion of bounty hunting.

"Don't get me wrong, boys," he explained carefully. "We're not huntin' Brace Jordan, but he might be huntin' for us now that Twine Creed has escaped. I'm tryin' to tell yuh that every one of them outlaws is a killer without conscience. When they press trigger, they won't be just shootin' to hear the guns go off. We've got to save the water for the trail drive, and if Brace Jordan can destroy the dam, the valley cattlemen will have a tough time gettin' their steers to Longhorn."

Dan Dunstan nodded, but Charley Bowie and Eddie Frane only drew their six-shooters and carefully checked the loads. There was a different expression on their tanned faces, and Morgan smiled grimly, and with quiet satisfaction. Within a few years, they would be members of the Calavera Cattlemen's Association, and now they were fighting for themselves.

Dave Fuller led the party up a shaly slope which terminated on a little mesa fringed with brush and wild pecan trees. A jagged hogback protected the shelf from the north, and Wayne Morgan posted Eddie Frane on the ridge to act as look-out. The rest of the party loosened their cinchas and picketed the horses to graze while they ate a cold supper of meat sandwiches.

Twilight was shading the hills when Eddie Frane called down to Morgan from his post. The west wall of the earthen dam could be seen in the distance which Morgan estimated to be about three miles.

"Riders up yonder, Morgan," Eddie Frane reported. "Looks like we lost time while the hosses was restin'."

"Like as not we stopped just in time to keep from ridin' into a trap," Morgan corrected. "Brace Jordan is smart, Eddie. He must have had look-outs posted the same as we did."

MORGAN climbed the ridge and cupped a pair of old field glasses to his eyes. He studied the wall of the dam for a long moment, then handed the glasses to Fuller who came up beside him.

"They're headin' for the face of the dam," Morgan said quietly. "Looked to me like they were drivin' a loaded pack-hoss, but I've got a plan that might work."

Olaf Thorsen climbed the little ridge and took the glasses from Fuller. The big hard-rock man squinted as he adjusted the glasses to his eyes, and then he spoke hoarsely.

"That bane dynamite, Morgan. Dem fallers have got picks and shovels, by yimminy!"

"Just as I thought," Morgan answered.

He gave orders to each man. Fuller was to circle south and ride over to cover the west wall of the dam. Eddie Frane and Charley Bowie would ride to the north and cover the back wall. Dan Dunstan would work up and fight on the east side. Morgan studied Thorsen's rugged face and told the Norwegian to ride with him toward the face of the dam where the dynamite would be planted.

"Night is comin' on," Morgan told his crew. "Ride on out, take yore positions and hunt good cover. If we stop this attempt on the

dam, all of yuh will stand guard for a day or so till I can send yuh relief. Let's get goin' while we still have light enough to see!"

CHAPTER VI

Dynamite

THE scramble of spurred boots and the creak of leather were the only sound as the cowboys returned to the horses and tightened their saddle-cinchas. Now each man had his rifle ready as he rode away to take his post in helping to surround the big earthen dam.

Morgan waited with Olaf Thorsen until Dave Fuller was out of sight, then started east and a little to the south. The shadows had deepened and merged with the night before Morgan and his companion reached the point which Thorsen said would command the face of the dam. Morgan told Thorsen to take the lead, as the big Norwegian had handled the powder and dynamite when constructing the big fill.

Thorsen rode solidly in the saddle with the bridle-reins hooked to the fingers of his big left hand, while he kept his right in its sling close to holstered gun on his left hip. Morgan had his thirty-gun across his knees. The pockets of his brush coat were bulging with extra cartridges for his rife. He raised his head slightly when the thin keen cry of a hunting lion came down the wind slightly to the north from the east.

"Dat lion, she is smell something," Thorsen muttered, without turning his head. "Yonder is the place, Morgan. We used the big horses and scrapers up here."

He stopped his horse and dismounted awkwardly because of his injured shoulder.

Morgan slid from saddle, led his horse into the brush, tied the grulla to a springy branch, and followed Thorsen through the gloom to a place that looked like the tailing-camp of a mine. A small trail led to the face of the dam which hung over a rocky gorge which formed a spillway. Big boulders provided ideal cover.

Thorsen raised his shaggy head and sniffed inquiringly. Morgan smelled wood smoke at the same time, and as he did a rifle barked from over on the east side of the dam. The shot was answered by several guns.

Morgan lined his sights and fired at the flashes from the guns of the outlaws. Now his eyes were becoming accustomed to the murky gloom, and he could make out several figures crawling along the narrow trail under the face of the earthen dam.

Olaf Thorsen's heavy six-shooter began to roar as the Norwegian rested the gun in the crook of his left arm, his right in the bandanna sling.

A man yelled with pain, and Morgan caught his sights when a second man came into view, holding a pitch torch.

"Dey bane gonna plant the dynamite!" Thorsen shouted hoarsely. "I nicked that faller, but he's up again!"

Wayne Morgan was flat on his stomach with his rifle thrust out between two rocks. A man was crawling toward the dam where a hole had been shoveled, and the fellow was carrying a bundle of some kind. The other man held his torch high, waiting to set off the fuse.

Morgan squeezed off a shot. The crawling man screamed hoarsely and pitched to the side on the narrow trail. The man with the torch was leaning forward when a distant rifle barked faintly. The torch-bearer pitched off the shelf and plummeted down into the spillway.

Wayne Morgan murmured softly in his throat. He knew that shot hadn't come from Fuller's post, nor had the warning cry come from the throat of a lion.

"Nice shootin', Hawk," Morgan praised softly.

"Hey, what you say?" Thorsen called.

"That bundle is rollin'," Wayne Morgan answered.

Olaf Thorsen began to moan softly. He twisted his big body from side to side in an effort to help, and then Morgan realized what was happening. The dynamite had fallen in the soft earth with a series of sparks sputtering at one end. The man with the torch had lighted the fuse before tumbling into the rocky gorge!

"Yust a leetle hit more!" Thorsen moaned, and his deep voice was like a prayer.

A rifle barked from the east to tell of Dave Fuller's position, and faintly from the north two rifles were chattering steadily. These would be the guns of Eddie Frane and big Charley Bowie. Morgan and Thorsen were hugging the rocks and staring toward the stuttering sparks some three hundred yards across the rock-strewn gorge.

WAYNE MORGAN, taut with anxiety, suddenly thought of a way to save the face of the dam which he could see faintly in the light from the smoking torch which had dropped to the loamy soil. If he could shoot under the bundle of dynamite and cut the earth away, the explosives might gather momentum.

Holding his breath, he sent a shot across the gorge. The bundle moved slightly, and Thorsen cheered like a small boy. Another shot, and the hard-rock man groaned. The sparks on the long fuse were racing toward the explosives, when Morgan fired again.

The ranchers needed that precious store of water which would be wasted if the charge exploded where it was. Then as the flat bark of the rifle echoed among the rocks, the bundle began to move with increasing speed. Morgan had fired the last cartridge in the magazine, and was reloading with feverish haste.

The dynamite paused for a moment against a rock and came to rest almost on the lip of the spillway. Olaf Thorsen was moaning and praying fervently. Morgan pushed his rifle out ahead, lined up his sights, and pressed the trigger.

The rock moved slightly and began to topple. A second shot started it to sliding, and then the stuttering spark slid over the edge of the spillway!

Wayne Morgan held his breath and closed his straining eyes. The light from the torch went out. Then a terrific explosion rocked the gorge and set the earth to trembling. Morgan buried his head in his arms as dirt and pebbles began to rain down upon the old mountain trail.

"Tank God!" he heard Thorsen shout excitedly. "She slid off yust in time. Come on, Morgan! I tink we save de dam!"

Morgan jumped to his feet and followed the racing hard-rock man down the narrow trail and under the very face of the dam. A rifle barked from the east, and Morgan found cover and yelled for Thorsen to make himself thin. Anything that moved would be a target for Dave Fuller's rifle, for Dave would not be able to distinguish friend from foe. But the big Norwegian chuckled happily as he hugged the earthen face of the dam and probed with cunning fingers for any other hidden explosives.

Morgan heard the big man grunt as he threw something out over the spillway into the gorge. He waited for an explosion, and when none came, Thorsen explained. The dynamite was harmless unless the caps were fastened in place. The outlaws had counted on the first explosion to set off the bigger charge.

The stars came out to filter a silvery glow over the rocky gorge, and Morgan worked his way over to join his companion. Thorsen explained that the narrow trail led to both the east and west walls, and Morgan made his plan quickly. He told Thorsen to work his way slowly toward the east, and to guard the trail until daylight, when he could make himself known to Dave Fuller.

"What you do, boss?" Thorsen asked.

Morgan answered that he would guard the trail from the west where he would be in position to contact Dan Dunstan, Eddie Frane, and Charley Bowie. Every man was to hold his position until he was relieved, and Morgan added that Brace Jordan might think his work had been done.

Thorsen hugged the dam and started working toward the east. Morgan waited a time before making his way back to the brushy pocket where the horses had been left. He was about to push through the brush screen when a pebble rattled on the trail and rolled down toward him.

Morgan stopped instantly and threw himself to one side. A six-shooter roared, with the slug cutting the leaves from a bush just over his head. But Morgan had acted instinctively, and his right-hand gun jumped to his hand and bellowed twice as he shot at the flash just up the trail.

A man screamed hoarsely and plunged down the trail, with loose pebbles rattling after him. Morgan held his smoking gun for a shot, changed his position, then moved forward. Now he could see the bushwhacker sprawled on the trail in the soft light of the stars. Morgan drew a deep breath as he stared at the outlaw's face.

He would know those long cowhorn mustaches anywhere. His attacker had been Twine Creed who had escaped from the Calaveras jail.

Wayne Morgan moved back a step into the deeper shadows. He wondered if Creed had followed him, or whether the outlaw who now was dead had first reported to Brace Jordan and had then cut Wayne Morgan's trail to seek a personal revenge. While he was still wondering, the ring of shod hoofs sounded from the trail leading up from the valley below.

MORGAN listened for a moment, then ran for his horse. He jerked the slip-knot as he gathered up his reins, jumped his saddle, and rode south to meet whoever was coming out from town. Now the hoofbeats were louder, and Morgan pulled up in the trailside brush, gun in hand.

He knew that more than one rider was coming up the wide trail where the work horses and scrapers had gouged a well-marked road. Then he heard a cowboy's yell, but it was in feminine tones, and he recognized the voice of Rosemary Lee.

Morgan answered the call and rode out to meet the two riders. Old Bob Lee was riding with his pretty daughter.

"The dam!" he shouted when he saw Morgan blocking the trail. "Did they blow her up?"

"The dam is safe for now," Morgan answered, and waited for the riders to draw rein. "What brings you faunchin' up here?" he asked the old cattleman.

"Trouble," Lee answered shortly. "There's a big herd of cattle comin' up from down toward the gulf, and every one of 'em full of ticks. We're needin' all hands to stop 'em!"

Morgan shook his head, then had a sudden thought.

"The section-hands workin' on the railroad," he said swiftly. "Get the foreman to knock off work and send some of his men up here to guard the dam. I want to look around some, but yuh can send Rosemary back with the word. Then yuh can meet our boys when it gets full daylight—it's comin' on fast now—and ride back to stop that infested herd."

"I don't like to send Rosemary back alone," Lee objected, but the spirited girl scoffed openly as she touched the holstered gun on her slim hip.

"I'll do it like Wayne Morgan says, Dad," she told her father "It will take every man we've got to win out now, so please don't argue. I'll have the men up here shortly after daybreak!"

Rosemary Lee turned her horse and galloped down the back trail before old Bob Lee could argue further. Morgan explained what had happened, and the old cattleman sighed with relief.

"Don't know how we will ever thank you, Morgan," he said gratefully. "And at that, our troubles have only started."

"I want to look around some," Morgan answered evasively. "You cover the west end here so Thorsen's back won't be exposed. I want to scout and find out where them outlaws are, and what they mean to do. If I get in a tight, I'll ride down alone as soon as I find out what I want to know. Post them section-hands all around the dam when they come up, and I'll be seein' yuh."

"Keep a close watch," Lee warned. "Brace Jordan would give somethin' pretty to get yuh under his sights, and we need yuh right now!"

Wayne Morgan nodded, but he was not thinking of himself. He was staring at the walls of the dam toward the north. Swiftly oncoming daylight showed the breast of the dam unharmed, but the spillway far down in the lip of the deep gorge was marked with gashes of raw red color to show where the explosives had dissipated their destructive forces.

Morgan was certain that Brace Jordan would make another move when the outlaw discovered that his plans had failed. The key spot would be the old trail below the breast of the dam, and Morgan told Bob Lee to work his way toward the east and make himself known to Dave Fuller. He himself would contact Dan Dunstan, Charley Bowie, and Eddie Frane.

"They can't do much at the back of the dam," Morgan explained to Lee. "You fellers will have to protect that old trail until the section-hands ride up to take over the guard duty."

The old cattleman nodded glumly and rode along the wide trail to contact Dave Fuller. Morgan rode along the west wall until he met Eddie Frane. The freckled-faced cowboy grinned and called to big Charley Bowie who came riding out from cover with his thirty-gun in his calloused hands.

Morgan talked quietly and posted the two men to guard the east end of the wide trail, after which he rode north to meet young Dan Dunstan. Again the thin quavering call of the catamount keened through the mountain air just as Morgan saw Dunstan riding toward him.

"The big cats are thick in these parts," young Dunstan remarked carelessly. "Did them outlaws go ahead and blow up the dam, Morgan?"

Again Morgan explained briefly and posted Dunstan to guard the west trail. He knew that Blue Hawk was furnishing another pair of eyes for him, and after Dunstan had ridden south to take up his post, Morgan gigged

his horse with a blunted spur and continued up the steep mountain trail.

CHAPTER VII

Flag of Truce

MORGAN came out in a grove of wild pecan trees above the dam, and a moment later he was joined by Blue Hawk. The Yaqui beckoned silently and rode away. Wayne Morgan followed up a deer trail for more than a mile, and smiled when the Indian pushed his horse through a brush-screen near a hidden cave. As usual, Blue Hawk had found a hide-out for himself and the Masked Rider.

"Senor," Blue Hawk explained quietly, and handed Morgan the Masked Rider's long black cloak, "the outlaw, Brace Jordan, is coming with eight men."

Morgan donned the cloak, adjusted his black mask, and changed to the black stallion, Midnight. Now his face was grim as he pondered over his best course of action. The outlaw could not get under the breast of the dam to do any serious damage while the cattlemen were on guard. But Morgan also knew that Jordan was a man of resourcefulness, and would try other plans.

"There is another trail, Senor," Blue Hawk said quietly. "It follows down the west and comes out on a little shelf below the spillway of the great dam. The outlaws are riding that trail!"

The Masked Rider frowned as he realized the danger of his position. He would not want to get too close to the cattlemen, and he watched as Blue Hawk peered through the thick brush. The Yaqui held up a hand and motioned for the Masked Rider to come closer. Peering through the brush screen, the Masked Rider took a deep breath at what he saw.

Brace Jordan was riding at the head of his gang, and the handsome outlaw was carrying a piece of white cloth in his left hand. The outlaws were more than a quarter of a mile distant, and riding south along a steep trail which paralleled the one along the west wall of the dam.

Watching, the Masked Rider pieced the puzzle together. Brace Jordan was going to talk from behind a flag of truce, and this fact told the Masked Rider that the outlaw was sure of himself and his own position. The outlaws would not respect a flag of truce, but Jordan evidently figured that he would be safe. The valley cattlemen were not outlaws.

"Cover my back, Blue Hawk," the Masked Rider told the Yaqui. "I'm goin' to circle around even farther to the west, and come up below Jordan and his trail wolves. I know a high place which'll overlook that gorge, but we'll both keep out of sight till I see what happens!"

The outlaws had disappeared when the Masked Rider emerged from the hiding place and touched the black stallion with his spur. The big horse responded willingly and carried its rider swiftly through the timber. A game of chess was about to be played, and the pawns were living men who would move across the board under the direction of two master minds.

The Masked Rider kept to cover and rode a wide circle. He was south of the dam, and Midnight was climbing a steep trail which led up to a little shelving mesa on a rocky hill when a rifle shot barked to tell the Masked Rider that the cattlemen must have discovered the approach of the outlaws. The Masked Rider urged his black stallion up the slant.

At the top, the masked man reined in, to let his horse blow. Then at something he saw he was instantly out of saddle with his thirty-gun in his strong brown hands. Crouching behind a thick screen of juniper, he looked down across the deep gorge which furnished the spillway for the big earthen dam.

Two hundred yards below his hiding place, the Masked Rider saw several horses tethered in a little grassy pocket on another small mesa. Perhaps three hundred yards to the north and below the first mesa where the horses were tied, he could see the wide road where the scrapers had worked beneath the breast of the dam. That would be where old Bob Lee and his boys would be hiding. The Masked Rider smiled grimly when flashes from two rifles told him that the old cattleman and Dave Fuller were on the job.

The Masked Rider was invisible behind his brush screen, but he commanded a view of the whole scene below him. His eyes widened when a bit of white cloth began to wave near the shelf where the outlaws had tied their horses. The rifles across the gorge stopped barking, and then a tall man stepped out behind the white flag of truce.

"Hold your fire, Bob Lee!" a deep vibrant voice called clearly. "We've got yuh surrounded, and I want to make some talk!"

BRACE JORDAN stepped back behind a big boulder as he finished speaking. The Masked Rider watched the two shelves and waited for Lee to answer. Evidently the old cattleman was puzzled, but his gruff voice finally spoke.

"Like you said, Brace Jordan, but make it brief. What yuh got on yore mind, yuh blasted owlhooter?"

"I'm givin' yuh a chance," Brace Jordan answered clearly. "Round up yore cowboys and ride on home. Yuh ain't goin' to build that railroad, or ship yore cattle. If yuh keep on tryin' yuh'll all be killed!"

"To blazes and perdition with you, Brace Jordan!" Bob Lee yelled furiously. "Up to now you've had most of the losses, and we are just beginnin' to fight, suh!"

"Creighton Blaine will die," the outlaw answered with startling suddenness. "We've got him in a safe place, and yuh can't work without him!"

Silence for a moment, then the old cattleman answered with a derisive laugh.

"Blaine is safe in Longhorn!" he shouted back.

"He's my prisoner," Jordan announced clearly. "I'm holdin' him till my demands are met!"

"Yuh're a liar!" old Bob Lee shouted angrily, but his voice held a note of worry.

Here was something the Masked Rider had not counted on. If the outlaw were telling the truth, the Calaveras cattlemen were indeed in a desperate plight. Creighton Blaine had all the plans for the building of the spur road from Longhorn to Calaveras, and he was the directing force behind the whole project.

"I'll make yuh eat them words," Brace Jordan answered Bob Lee coldly. "Creighton's daughter will get a letter, and her father will meet his death unless my orders are carried out!"

The Masked Rider listened and watched, and he knew that old Bob Lee was turning this new angle slowly over in his mind. At last the old cattleman spoke wearily.

"What are yore demands, Jordan?"

Brace Jordan stepped out into view behind the white flag. The Masked Rider raised his rifle and fined his sights on the outlaw's broad chest. Then he sighed and slowly shook his head just as Brace Jordan began to speak.

"Call off yore men and ride on back to Calaveras," Jordan said arrogantly, like a man who holds all the high cards in a poker game for high stakes. "Blaine's girl is to get a ransom of fifty thousand dollars, and her father'll be released when the money is paid!"

The Masked Rider could picture the torment of uncertainty which Bob Lee was experiencing. Creighton Blaine was the brains behind the spur railroad, and he also was furnishing most of the money. And Brace Jordan was the kind who would carry out his threats.

Before Bob Lee could make answer, the Masked Rider left his hiding place and stepped boldly into view.

"The answer is NO!" he called loudly.

Brace Jordan whirled around at the unexpected interruption, and saw the speaker high above on the rocky shelf. The Masked Rider was squinting down the barrel of his rifle, his finger on the trigger.

"If yore men fire a shot, you'll be the first to die, Brace Jordan," the Masked Rider warned clearly. "And if anything happens to Creighton Blaine, I will hold you personally responsible!"

"The Masked Rider!"

Brace Jordan muttered the name through tight lips, but he was careful to hold the white flag of truce high above his head. After a moment the outlaw said slowly, almost eagerly:

"All I want is a chance to meet yuh on even terms, yuh Robin Hood outlaw! The law is lookin' for you the same as it is for me, but this country ain't big enough for both of us!"

"I could have killed yuh." The Masked Rider spoke evenly, and without shouting, but his clear voice carried over to old Bob Lee.

"It will be different if I get you under my sights!" Brace Jordan shouted, his voice hoarse with anger. "I had this game all served up till you rode in here, but yuh won't ride out!"

"But you will," the Masked Rider answered. "Tell yore men to start back up the way they came, but you stay put until I give the word. If you think I'm bluffin', watch that flag!"

HIS rifle barked as he finished speaking, and the flag of truce fluttered to the ground. Brace Jordan stared at the branch he held in his hand. It had been cut in two just below the white flag.

He spoke quietly to the men behind him, but both Lee and the Masked Rider could hear his orders.

"You men mount and get back the way we came. If anything happens to me, yuh know what to do to Creighton Blaine!"

Jordan still faced the Masked Rider, and the sound of retreating hoofs told that the outlaw band was obeying orders. As the Masked Rider kept Jordan under his gun, the faint cry of the hunting lion came just loud enough for him to hear.

The Masked Rider turned his head slightly and scanned the far-away trail in the distant south. A band of horsemen was riding up from the valley, and the Masked Rider spoke again to Brace Jordan.

"If yuh harm Blaine, I'll hunt yuh down and kill yuh, Jordan. Yuh worked under a flag of truce, and it has been respected. Now yuh can ride off, but yuh can't destroy the dam. And yuh better hurry before that bunch from the valley gets any closer. They are only about a mile away, and comin' up fast!"

Brace Jordan lowered his hands and turned slowly. He walked to his waiting horse, mounted swiftly, and rode away without making an answer.

The Masked Rider stepped back into the brush screen and mounted the black stallion. He knew that he would have to ride to the east to escape a meeting with the section-hands coming up from the southwest, but he held the sure-footed horse to a fast walk until he was certain he could not be seen from the dam.

Then he lifted Midnight into a lope and rode like the wind until he reached the hiding place where he had met Blue Hawk. The Yaqui met him with a grave face, took the long black cloak, and spoke softly.

"Senor, we ride to rescue the old one?" he asked wistfully.

Wayne Morgan changed horses and shook his head. He told Blue Hawk that he would have to make sure, and that perhaps the riders from Calaveras would have a message.

"Senor, a girl rides with those men from the valley," Blue Hawk informed Morgan. "I could see her with the glasses. The same girl who set off the charge of powder the first day we offered our help."

"Sandra Blaine?" Morgan repeated, then squared back his broad shoulders. "It looks as though Jordan wasn't bluffin'," he said quietly. "I'll ride now to join 'em, and you keep yore eyes open to see what yuh can find out about Creighton Blaine. I'll see yuh when it's safe for me to get away. . . ."

Wayne Morgan rode down from the northwest on the grulla horse branded with the Circle L. In the hour that had passed since he had left Blue Hawk, Bob Lee had posted the section-hands from the railroad all around the dam. The old cattleman and Sandra Blaine had raced to Morgan when he had ridden up and said that he had seen Brace Jordan and his gang riding toward the distant scarred hills of the Bondrios.

"I talked to that nervy owlhoot," Bob Lee said gruffly. "He stepped out under a flag of truce, and made his demands. Then the Masked Rider bought chips in the game and told Jordan 'No!' "

"I'm worried, Wayne," Sandra Blaine interrupted. "Dad has been kidnaped, and Brace Jordan demands a ransom of fifty thousand dollars for his return!"

So the outlaw was not bluffing. Wayne Morgan watched the girl and his face betrayed no emotion. He took a soiled envelope the girl handed to him, read what was written on the piece of paper it held, and handed the note back to Sandra Blaine.

"The ransom money," he said quietly. "Are yuh goin' to pay it?"

Sandra looked at Bob Lee, and Morgan knew that the girl was thinking of the partnership her father had bought for her in the Circle L ranch. The old cattleman looked down at the ground waiting for the girl to answer. Obviously he was thinking about the herds of cattle in the valley and their value on Eastern markets.

"I can get the money over at Austin," Sandra said finally. "Even if it means the loss of everything to Dad and me, I'd give it all to save him. But I will not pay the money to Burleigh Carter as the note directs!"

MORGAN nodded and turned to Lee. He told the old cattleman of his duel in the dark with the escaped outlaw, and of the death of Twine Creed. Lee's nostrils began to flare with excitement.

"We hunted for sign around the jail like yuh said, Morgan," he answered crisply. "We found boot tracks that fitted the footgear Carter was wearin', but Jed Thompson pointed out that he and Carter had talked for an hour with Creed at the back window of the jail, so we had no proof that Carter was mixed up in the jail-break."

"I'm riding to Longhorn with Dan Dun-

stan," Sandra interrupted. "I'll take the train from there to Austin, and will be back as soon as possible."

Morgan frowned, then remembered the long ride through the wild country along Deep River. Bob Lee said he was also sending Tim Clancy along to handle things at the Longhorn end of the spur road during Blaine's absence. Morgan shook hands with Sandra and wished her luck, and the two men watched her ride down the trail to join young Dan Dunstan.

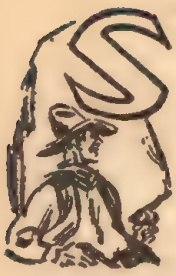
"Dave Fuller won't like that arrangement," Morgan said thoughtfully.

"But Dave is down in the valley makin' arrangements to round up all our men," Lee explained. "We've got to make tracks, Wayne. There's one mighty big herd of Gulf cattle comin' up this way, and we've got to hold 'em back. The critters are plumb full of ticks, and you know what would happen if our shippers got Texas fever!"

"Let's get goin'," Morgan said swiftly. "We can talk as we ride to town, and I've a plan of my own."

CHAPTER VIII

The Living Death



SINCE the railroad section-hands were guarding the big dam, immediate worry from that source was eliminated. Everything pointed to a link-up between the Chicago Syndicate and Brace Jordan, with Burleigh Carter acting as intermediary, tarred with the brush of both the unscrupulous Syndicate and the outlaw gang.

As they came out of the hills and entered the broad fertile valley, Wayne Morgan told Bob Lee of his plan. Mainly, it consisted of getting out every fighting man and cowboy to hold back the surging herd of infected cattle from the south, while the teamsters spanned in their teams of heavy draft horses, and cut a ditch.

"I got the idea from them fills yuh made up at the dam," Morgan told Lee. "Them big Percheron horses will do the work in a day or two. Have the gang plows go in first, and then the scrapers can foller right behind. Turn a head of water in the ditch we make, and load it heavy with carbolic and creosote dip!"

Bob Lee looked skeptical, but he sided with Morgan when they reached the group of cattlemen in the public square. Till Burdock argued that he wanted no part of sheep-dip, and tall lanky Joe Dunstan asked Burdock if he had ever had spotted fever.

"No, I never, and I don't want none," Burdock answered savagely.

"Then bridle yore jaw and keep a civil tongue in yore head," Dunstan retorted grimly. "If we get ticks among our shippers, we won't be allowed to ship a head of beef out of the valley this year. And that ain't all, Burdock. I've seen men get bit by them ticks, and they come down with what's called spotted fever. Some calls it Texas fever, but the results are the same. Morgan has the right idea, and we'll scrape that ditch and fill it to the brim with dip!"

Dave Fuller rode in at a gallop on a lathered horse, and headed straight for Wayne Morgan. Fuller shouted his news in his excitement, and his right hand kept slapping at his smoke-grimed gun.

"We've got to hurry, Wayne! That herd of brush cattle ain't more'n ten miles from the south end of the valley, and the boys are havin' a gunfight right now to hold 'em back! Must be at least twenty brush cowboys driving that herd, but three of 'em won't ever set saddle again. They got Big Charley Bowie in the left shoulder, but Charley killed the rannigan who winged him. We need help, and we need it in a hurry!"

Morgan turned quickly to old Bob Lee and told him to round up the teamsters and their equipment. Morgan told Burdock and Dunstan to ride with him, and said that they would stop at the Circle L for a fresh change of horses. He also suggested that they take every man they could spare from the crew which was holding the valley cattle on bedground, leaving a skeleton crew to ride circle around the gathered shipping steers.

"I'm for startin' our own drive to Longhorn," Till Burdock declared vehemently. "Then even if them brush cattle do break through, our steers will be clean."

"And yore foundation stock would be ruined," Morgan said bluntly. "Not only that, but the traildrivers might join up with Brace Jordan's outlaws to stop the drive through Deep River gorge."

"This calls for a meetin' of the Association before we get into somethin' desperate," Burdock argued. "Seems to me like you make all the plans here, Morgan. I don't like

it, and I didn't hire yuh!"

"Then yuh can't fire me," Morgan pointed out brusquely. "This is no time for arguments among ourselves, Burdock. While you men were whittlin' and spittin, that herd would be in the valley. Yuh'd not only lose a lot of cattle, but lose yore chance to put the railroad through from Longhorn!"

"Morgan is right," Joe Dunstan spoke up. "On top of that, we've got to get this thing settled so's we can do somethin' about the kidnapin' of Creighton Blaine!"

"I thought yuh was goin' to watch Burleigh Carter," Burdock reminded nastily.

Dunstan flushed and slapped for his belt gun.

"You say another word about me bein' in cahoots with Carter, and I'll settle with yuh personal, Burdock!" he warned hoarsely. "And if yuh don't like my wartalk, yuh can have it now!"

WAYNE MORGAN walked between the two men with his right hand on his gun. He watched Till Burdock narrowly as he spoke.

"Can't you men see that Carter was put here to do just what he's doin'?" he asked. "To make trouble between you valley men? If yuh get to fightin' among yoreselves, yuh won't be united to fight against the common enemy!"

"That's right, Morgan," Dunstan agreed thoughtfully, and smiled at Till Burdock. "I hope you see it the same way, Till."

"I see I'm outnumbered," Burdock grumbled.

When they reached the Circle L, the men dismounted and took down their catch-ropes to get fresh mounts from the saddle-herd. Rosemary Lee came out to the corral while Morgan was tightening his latigo. He had roped out a deep-chested bay, and he smiled when the pretty little dark-haired girl asked him how long it had been since he had eaten a hot meal.

"My stomach feels like my throat was cut," Morgan admitted.

Rosemary told the busy cattlemen that dinner was ready and on the table. Morgan pointed out that they might not get another hot meal for some time, and the riders trooped to the cook-shack where a long table was laden with steaming victuals.

There was little conversation during the meal which was finished in fifteen minutes. Rosemary told Morgan then that she was going to ride with the men just in case they needed a messenger. Morgan exacted a promise from the spirited girl that she would stay away from the fighting, and Dave Fuller declared that he would look out for Rosemary. The girl turned on him as she heard his sulky tone of voice.

"No, you don't, Davey," she said sternly. "I can read your mind, cowboy. Dan Dunstan rode with Sandra because you were busy down here, and someone had to see her safely through the gorge. Now you stop acting like a spoiled brat!"

Dave Fuller grinned and tugged at his forelock. "Yes'm," he said contritely. "If you can trust that wild cowboy, Dan Dunstan, I reckon I can trust Sandra."

"Dan is just another friend of mine," Rosemary answered tartly, and then her expression changed. "It's Sandra I'm thinking about," she explained slowly, in her Deep South drawl. "Sandra's father is in danger, and I know just how she feels."

"Boots and saddles," Morgan ordered curtly, and vaulted to saddle. "You take the lead, Dave, and ride yore spurs to make up for the time we've already lost!"

Dave Fuller swung aboard his gray gelding and led the charge out of the big yard and across the rolling grassy valley. Eight sweating cowboys joined them as they passed the holding grounds where the fat shipping steers were grazing on the headed grass.

Morgan told the men to look to their weapons, and to shoot any cattle from the tick-infested herd which might break through the handful of men who had been trying to hold them back.

Dave Fuller again took the lead and raced south, and Morgan counted fifteen men in his little band. Five more who were fighting the intruders from the south would make the battle fairly even, and the twenty cattlemen from the valley had the pockets of their brush coats stuffed with cartridges.

Rosemary Lee rode with Wayne Morgan as they raced across the southern tip of the long valley. Morgan lifted his head and listened as faint popping sounds became audible, and as they topped a little rise and drew in the horses for a breather, Morgan pointed to a long thin moving line far to the south.

"There they come, men!" he shouted, as he pointed to the herd of brush-cattle coming toward them. "If we can't turn 'em back, use yore guns and kill as many as yuh can!"

"What right have we got to kill another

man's cattle?" Till Burdock demanded, and Morgan turned on him with a frown of anger.

"The right of self-preservation," he answered sternly. "Yuh can't seem to get it through yore head, Burdock, but them tick-infested steers are just the same as a living death. If yuh get that spotted fever, yuh won't ever argue about sheep-dip again!"

"Pay that old knothead no mind," Joe Dunstan told Morgan. "I had tick-fever one time, and I hope he gets a little of the same!"

MORGAN began to give orders to avoid another clash of personalities. He told Joe Dunstan to take five men and ride toward the east, while Burdock took five more and headed southwest. The rest of the men would follow him down toward the center where the surging herd seemed more numerous.

Then Morgan turned to Rosemary Lee.

"Ride back and tell yore dad to hurry with them big hosses," he told the excited girl. "They can plow and scrape tonight in the dark of the moon, and we'll try to hold that drive on the other side of the little creek!"

Rosemary pleaded with her eyes to stay, but Morgan was adamant. He explained how necessary it was to get the barrier built before the valley was overrun, and Rosemary gave in.

"I understand, Wayne," she agreed, and a shudder shook her lithe young body. "I won't argue, not after what Joe Dunstan said about the—living death!"

"Good girl," Morgan praised quietly, and Rosemary rode her back-trail with a wave of her hand.

Morgan looked over his men, gave them instructions, and told them to keep under what cover they could find. Then he stood up in his stirrups and gave the order to charge.

Eddie Frane came riding out of a long buffalo wallow to meet Wayne Morgan and his men who were riding to join up the fight. Frane's freckled face was covered with blood from a deep bullet-gash in his scalp, and his red hair was tousled and stuck up through the air-holes in his battered old Stetson.

"Just rode up to tell yuh to keep in this wallow!" he shouted. "Them brush cattle is down in the creek, but we can't hold 'em after they slake their thirst!"

"Are yuh hurt bad, Eddie?" Morgan called, but Frane shrugged and shook his head.

"Just a scratch," he depreciated. "But me and the boys are low on shells, and you-all got here just in time!"

Morgan handed Frane a box of rifle cartridges and told his men to take positions in the wallow facing the creek which was about three hundred yards to the south. As the men began shooting, Morgan rode through the wallow, giving ammunition to the smoke-grimed cowboys who had stemmed the first mad rush of the gulf cattle for water.

Rifles began to bark from both far ends of the line, and Morgan told his men to fire at the flashes from the dense brush across the creek. Then he took up a position behind a clump of creosote bush on the lip of the wallow, and his thirty-gun began to talk as he fined his sights and picked his targets.

Looking out across the rangeland to the south of the creek, Morgan could vaguely see a group of riders rounding up the wild long-horned brush steers. He watched for a moment, reached for his old field-glasses, and his nostrils began to flare. He could see what was about to happen. The riders in the distance were going to start a stampede, hoping to overrun the defenders guarding the valley grazing lands!

Morgan watched for a moment, then told the men to pass the word along the line.

"Shoot the lead steers, and pile 'em up before they hit the creek!"

As the order was relayed from man to man, the shooting died down. Every man had his magazine loaded, and was holding his fire for that desperate charge. Morgan cupped his glasses to his eyes when he saw one of his men shoot a charging steer at the far southwest end of the line.

"The fool!" Morgan raged under his breath.

The man was leaning over the shot steer, examining the dead animal, touching the dead steer! Morgan recognized the stocky form of Till Burdock. There was nothing he could do about it because of the distance, and Morgan turned his glasses on the riders across the creek. Then he slipped the glasses in the pocket of his brush coat and passed the word for his men to get ready.

"Here they come!" he shouted. "Make every shot count, and pile them tick steers up high on the far bank!"

The clatter of horns and the rattle of racing hocks became louder. The stampede was gathering momentum as the driven herd picked up stragglers along the way. The steers in the creek jerked up their heads and

tried to escape, but the main herd was swiftly upon them, pushing them forward.

Wayne Morgan picked his targets and triggered his rifle. Guns were barking all along the wallow, and running steers were dropping like flies.

These men had been trained not to waste ammunition, and a steer dropped whenever a rifle barked.

NOW the stampeding cattle were plunging over the bodies of their dead fellows as the trail drivers rode behind them with crackling slickers and roaring six-guns. As the barricade of dead steers grew higher on the south bank of the creek, Morgan reloaded his hot rifle and studied the scene.

With his magazine reloaded, he raised his sights and slowly squeezed off a shot. A lanky rider screamed and pitched from his saddle. One of his companions followed him when Morgan's rifle spoke again. Now the valley cowboys were shooting at the intruding cowboys who suddenly realized that they were within range.

Morgan counted seven men go down before the raiders turned and raced away to the south. Again the slaughter was taken up until the remaining cattle turned back and rattled away out of range.

Wayne Morgan walked through the wallow to count the extent of injuries. Three men had wounds in their left arms, but none had suffered fatal injury. Here and there a rifle would bark to kill a stray that had waded across the creek.

Morgan turned to look at the westering sun. It was getting close to sundown, and quiet settled over the range. Nothing was to be seen of the trail drivers from the gulf country, but old Bob Lee rode up on a lathered horse and sat looking at the slaughter along the creek.

"By dogies!" he whispered hoarsely. "You boys must have killed a thousand head of their scrubby longhorns. Ain't that a man I see yonder on the ground by that bunch grass?"

"He was a man," Morgan answered coldly. "They started a stampede, and we got six or seven of 'em."

"Let's ride over for a look," Lee suggested, and Morgan shuddered involuntarily.

"Warn all the men not to touch them bodies or the steers," he passed the word along, and rode out of the wallow with the old cattleman.

CHAPTED IX

Spotted Fever

OLD BOB LEE was grim-faced and silent until they came to the first man lying in a clump of grama grass. He sat his saddle and spoke softly.

"Yuh didn't have to kill this one, Wayne. Look at the spots all over his hands and face. He had the spotted fever, and he couldn't have lived long without medical attention!"

Morgan nodded and jerked up his head when a groan came from the right. He walked his horse over to a clump of mesquite, followed by Lee and Dave Fuller who had joined them.

"I'm dyin'—dyin', I tell yuh!" a hoarse voice muttered. "And I hope Brace Jordan gets it the same way for sendin' us on this drive!"

"We've got to help that feller," Bob Lee said gruffly. "Where yuh shot, hombre?"

"I ain't shot," the raider answered drowsily. "My hoss stumbled and went down. I got the spotted fever three days ago, and no medicine!"

"The doc is comin' out from town," Lee told Morgan. "Mebbe he can help this feller, but I wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole!"

The man on the ground shuddered convulsively and stretched out his long legs. Morgan watched a moment, removed his hat, and turned his horse to ride away.

"The doctor won't do him any good," he murmured, and rode back across the creek.

Bob Lee followed, and on the other side of the creek, he plucked at Morgan's sleeve.

"Did yuh hear what he said about Brace Jordan?" he asked.

Morgan nodded. "I figgered Jordan was in on this drive," he said quietly. "Brace Jordan is out to win one way or another. He don't care what happens to his men, and I'm wonderin' why he wanted fifty thousand dollars in cash."

"Yuh mean Jordan is goin' to try a getaway?" Lee asked.

"There's always South America, if he can get to a port," Morgan answered. "Look, Lee. When we get this thing settled here, I'm ridin' alone for a day or two."

"Better not," Lee warned. "If yuh ride

them hills lookin' for Brace Jordan, yuh better take Dave Fuller and Dan Dunstan along to guard yore back!"

Morgan shrugged, and changed the subject by asking when the teams and scrapers would arrive. Lee pointed to a long string in the distance, and Morgan watched and counted twenty teams of the huge work horses.

"We can save time by lengthenin' this wallow," he told Lee. "Then we can turn the creek in from the north where it comes down out of the hills. They ought to have it finished by sunup."

Till Burdock rode up and spoke shakily. Joe Dunstan had also joined the group, and he turned to stare at Burdock.

"A couple of them blasted ticks bit me," Burdock complained, and held out his right hand.

Morgan jerked around, remembering that Till Burdock had examined a shot steer just before the big fight. Burdock's hand was covered with little red spots. Joe Dunstan snorted and backed his horse away.

"Mebbe yuh'll learn a little savvy, yuh old mossyhead!" he shouted at Burdock. "Yuh've got spotted fever, and if yuh don't see a doctor pronto, yuh won't live to argue about it!"

"I drank a flask of whisky and taken some quinine," Burdock said shakily. "I feel dizzy!"

"Better unload from yore bronc before yuh fall off," Dunstan advised coldly. "Now mebbe yuh can savvy why we wanted to stop that herd before it got across the creek and into the valley!"

Till Burdock gulped and dismounted heavily. He sat down on a hummock, and the other men walked their horses to a safe distance. A little thin man rode up with a black satchel across his pommel, and Dunstan shouted at him. "Hey, Doc White! Till Burdock is down with the spotted fever!"

THE little medico stepped down from his horse, handed the bridle reins to Dunstan, and walked over to stare at Burdock. Then he opened his bag, took a hypodermic needle, and told Burdock to roll up his right sleeve.

"Yuh reckon I'll cash, Doc?" Burdock whispered, his face an ashen gray.

"You're lucky I rode out," the doctor answered curtly, as he administered the injection. "You'll have a raging fever, you will probably be delirious, but you'll live," he said crustily. "Anybody else been bit?"

"The rest of the men had better sense than to touch them critters," Dave Fuller said coldly, then he began to grin. "Dag-gone if old Bob didn't bring the chuckwagon out here to feed this hungry crew of fighting men!"

"It looks like the fighting is over for a while, and I'll give a few orders now," Doc White spoke up acidly. "Before you cowhands eat, you will strip off your clothing and sponge yourselves down good with a solution I mixed up near the chuckwagon. I don't want to hear any lip about smelling like a sheep, and if there are any arguments, just let those fellows take a look at Till Burdock. Of course that whisky he drank had a lot to do with it, but he is a good object lesson for the rest of you unwashed Siwashes!"

"Aw gee, Doc!" Dave Fuller objected. "I haven't been near them cattle or drovers on the other side. I'll just wash in the creek!"

"Stay out of that water!" the doctor roared. "Don't you know enough to see that those cattle have all been in the creek?"

"Well, we live and learn," Fuller murmured, and nodded his head vigorously. "I'll take the sheep-dip like yuh said, Doc."

"That goes for the rest of you cow nurses," the doctor blustered, and glared about for signs of an argument.

Every man in the crew nodded soberly. Then the teams of big horses came into the wallow and began to work, driven by brawny teamsters with a vocabulary of their own. Wayne Morgan watched as the big plows began to turn up the rich black soil.

Morgan was silent as he ate a heaping plate of hot grub near the chuckwagon where the men quickly gathered. Dave Fuller came over to sit beside Morgan, ate silently, and whispered to Morgan.

"Take me with yuh, Wayne," he pleaded. "Sandra might need my help!"

"Eh?" Morgan snorted, and drank some steaming coffee. "Yuh've been reading my mind, cowboy," he said quietly. "Shore, yuh can ride to Longhorn with me, but if we don't get what we want there, I'm ridin' on alone. Is that understood?"

"Yuh're the trail boss," Fuller agreed, and set to wolfing down his food. . . .

Harness chains rattled musically in the darkness as Wayne Morgan and Dave Fuller changed their saddle-gear to fresh horses. They could hear the mellow grumblings of the teamsters as the big draft horses worked in the Stygian darkness, plowing and scrap-

(Turn to page 44)

DICK WON ALL AROUND WHEN...

HERE'S A GRAND. IF THE FLASH LOSES, I'LL MAKE IT FIVE
O.K. IT'S IN THE BAG
AFTER GUARDING HIS HORSE ALL NIGHT, DICK O'NEIL, EX-MARINE AND OWNER OF "IWO JIMA", LONG SHOT, OVERHEARS SUSPICIOUS CONVERSATION ON MORNING OF BIG RACE
BETTER ACT FAST, MR. HILL. I WANT "IWO" TO BEAT YOUR HORSE, BUT I HATE CROOKS
I'LL CALL THE RACING ASSOCIATION

CAUGHT HIM RED-HANDED, MR. HILL. THE OLD SPONGE TRICK
MY OWN TRAINER! HOW COULD YOU DO SUCH A THING?
YOU'RE A REAL SPORTSMAN. WON'T YOU JOIN MY DAUGHTER AND ME IN OUR BOX?
THANKS... I'LL BE GLAD TO AT POSTTIME
FIRST CHANCE I'VE HAD TO SHAVE-AND NO RAZOR
COME ON, USE MINE

WHAT A SWELL BLADE, EDDIE! NEVER HAD A FASTER, SLICKER SHAVE
THIN GILLETTES ARE TOPS WITH ME. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN
O-O-O-O-O! IWO WINS!
I SURE WISH FLASH HAD BEEN AS WELL-TRAINED

I'M GOING TO HIRE A NEW TRAINER, MR. O'NEIL. ANY CHANCE YOU'D CARE TO TALK BUSINESS TONIGHT?
SOUNDS GOOD TO ME, MR. HILL
I LIKE HIS LOOKS
TO GET SMOOTH, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES WITH SPEED AND COMFORT, TRY THIN GILLETTE BLADES. THEY'RE KEEN, LONG-LASTING AND FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. THUS THEY PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette BLADES
4 for 10¢

ing the big ditch to connect up with the buffalo wallow where the valley men had turned back the tide of death.

Morgan suggested that they ride along the guard posts to make sure that their sentries were on the alert. Bob Lee rode with them to tell Morgan some things about the town of Longhorn which would be the northern terminus of the spur railroad.

The old cattleman avoided mention of Creighton Blaine until they were well away from the camp around the Circle L chuckwagon. When the inspection was completed, Lee cleared his throat to indicate that he had made up his mind.

"We'll start the drive when you get back, or send the word," he told Morgan. "I know yuh've got some plan in the back of yore head, and it has to do with Creighton Blaine. Just wanted to tell yuh that if everything else fails, yuh can make a deal with Brace Jordan through Burleigh Carter. I mean, the Valley Association will sell enough shippin' steers to pay that ransom!"

Morgan drew a deep breath, and his eyes widened in the murky gloom. He was glad that Bob Lee could not see his face, but the old cattleman did see the right hand that slipped to Morgan's holster instinctively.

"Don't draw Carter into a fight, Wayne," Lee warned soberly. "I don't like him any better'n you do, but he's the only connectin' link we have with that blasted outlaw. Him and Jediah Thompson," he added bitterly.

"Yeah, I know," Morgan murmured, and gripped the old cattleman's hand in the way strong men say good-by to each other. "I won't prod Carter into a ruckus," he promised quietly, then he and Dave Fuller were riding toward the east.

FULLER was silent as they rode a wide circle around the sleeping herd, through the cut where the railroad was almost completed, and reached the trail which skirted Deep River down in the rocky gorge.

"It'll take us seven-eight days to make the drive from Calaveras to Longhorn," Fuller broke his silence to say. "We can scout for bed-ground on the way east. I wonder if Sandra got away on the afternoon train."

Morgan smiled as his young companion spoke of the three things uppermost in his mind. Ten miles a day would be good time for the shipping herd, to hold good grass-fed flesh. With the earthen dam intact, there would be an abundance of water. If Sandra failed to raise the ransom money, the cattlemen would dig deep to expedite the release of Sandra's father.

No answer seemed necessary, and Morgan was busy with his own thoughts. He had speculated on the possibility of challenging the Syndicate representative, if and after Sandra paid over the money to Burleigh Carter. He told himself that he had two chances, for the Masked Rider could work where Wayne Morgan would be at a disadvantage.

Fuller led the way and picked several short-cuts to save precious miles. The two rode until after midnight, and made a fireless camp on a little rise which would afford protection against surprise. This was an old Indian custom Morgan had learned and, sleeping on the ground, he was confident that he would hear the approach of horses if any of the Jordan gang were on the prowl. . . .

The two men were up early, as the first light of dawn crept over the peaks of the Bondrios. They breakfasted on cold meat sandwiches washed down with icy cold water from the mountain springs which fed Deep River.

They might have been two stockmen picking bed-ground for the coming cattle drive as they rode the steep trails through waist-high lush grass, except for the fact that both men watched the brush-tops, and Dave Fuller's face took on the expression of the hunted. It was late afternoon when they reached the deep fill where Sandra Blaine had set off the giant charge of explosives, and Fuller spoke as they stopped the horses for a rest.

"We can make Longhorn by the middle of the night, Morgan," Fuller suggested hopefully. "Most of the cattlemen keep a change of hosses at the livery corrals, and we just might learn somethin' of interest."

"Like you said," Morgan agreed promptly, and Fuller sighed with relief.

"Sandra should get in tomorrow evenin'," Fuller murmured, half to himself. "I hope her luck was all good."

"Yeah," Morgan grunted. "I might work on my own after we hit Longhorn," he reminded Fuller. "If I don't show up when yuh expect me, I want you to keep an eye on Jed Thompson, that law-shark."

The horses were weary when the two men rode into the thriving little town at the railhead, and Fuller suggested that they put the horses up for a feed of grain, and then hunt

a hot bait of grub at the lunch counter near the depot. The old hostler at the livery barn glanced at his watch and remarked that it was ten o'clock and that they must have come a long way.

Fuller nodded and told the hostler to give the horses a double feed of grain, and led the way to the lunch counter. Their spurs chimed musically on the splintered board walk, and as they entered the lunch room and took seats at a small table, Fuller spoke guardedly to Morgan.

"Pay no mind, but Burleigh Carter and Jed Thompson are makin' medicine at a table in the back."

Morgan stretched his arms and legs, glanced into a mirror beneath the pie-rack behind the lunch counter, and he frowned. His careless glance had met the eyes of Carter in the mirror, and the Syndicate man was smiling mockingly. The lawyer was also watching. Morgan nodded slightly and gave his order to the waitress.

"Steak well done, a side of hash-browned spuds with fixin's. Plenty of hot coffee, and a wedge of green-apple pie."

Dave Fuller told the girl to make it a pair, and waited for Morgan to speak. He had seen the little by-play in the mirror, and he cleared his throat warningly as boots scraped on the planking.

BURLEIGH CARTER approached the table slowly, with a toothpick in his mouth. Morgan remained silent, and Carter stopped at the table.

"Evenin', gents," he said affably. "I heard our friend Twine Creed busted out of that run-down jail down Calaveras way."

"And there was a reward of five hundred on his scalp," Dave Fuller remarked bluntly. "Five hundred more for the widows' fund over at Austin."

"Yuh mean the widows of peace officers?" Carter asked.

"That's right," Fuller agreed. "The posters said 'Dead or Alive'."

"That's five hundred they won't collect," Carter said with a chuckle. "I hear Creed hit out for the hills and made a clean get-away."

"Some people never learn," Fuller retorted, and Morgan nodded without speaking.

"That's whatever," Carter agreed. "When you cattlemen decide yuh've had enough, the Syndicate will go ahead and finish this dinky railroad. Tell yore neighbors Jed Thompson stands ready to make 'em offers."

Dave Fuller could no longer endure the taunting smile of the Chicago Syndicate man. He looked hard at Carter as he made his announcement.

"Twine Creed is dead!"

Carter lost his smile as he leaned forward. "What did you say?" he demanded.

"You heard me," Fuller barked, then smiled as he recovered his poise. "Creed tried to bushwhack Morgan back in the hills, and the coroner said Tweed died of lead poisoning!"

"Brace Jordan ain't goin' to like that," Carter said slowly. "He just might take it out on Creighton Blaine!"

CHAPTER X

Carter Sheds His Guns

KEEPING stonily silent, Wayne Morgan began eating at once, as soon as the waitress brought the food. Fuller glanced at Carter and picked up knife and fork.

"Better shag along and pass the word to Thompson," he suggested. "A cowboy can't talk and eat at the same time."

Carter grunted and backed away. Morgan could hear the murmur of voices as the Syndicate man broke the news to the little lawyer. After a time, the two paid their check and left hurriedly. Morgan saw Dave Fuller frown as another man entered the lunch room and, glancing around, he saw young Dan Dunstan coming toward their table with a smile of welcome.

"Be a man, Dave," Morgan warned Fuller quietly. "Dan was doin' what you would have done in his place."

Fuller swallowed hard and managed a grin at Dunstan, and the two shook hands without warmth. Dan Dunstan leaned forward and spoke softly to Morgan.

"Did yuh have any words with Burleigh Carter?" he asked.

"Carter did all the talkin'," Morgan answered with a shrug. "Have yuh got something in yore craw I ought to know?"

"Just this," young Dunstan whispered. "Carter took off his gun-belts and handed 'em to the lawyer. He's waitin' outside on the platform, and he means to bring fight to somebody he don't like."

Morgan finished his pie, drank his hot cof-

fee, placed money on the table to pay the check, and pulled a pair of skin gloves on his strong brown hands. Then he arose and settled his Stetson.

"You watch that law-shark," he told Dave Fuller. "I seldom fight with my fists, but when I do, I fight to win!"

That was all he said as he walked through the doorway and out on the station platform. Burleigh Carter had shed his coat, and had rolled up his sleeves. He stepped toward Morgan to start the customary preliminaries, and it was then he learned that cowboys didn't fight Chicago-style.

Wayne Morgan came apart like a bucking horse, and in much the same manner. He leaped at Carter, jabbing with a stiff left before the Syndicate man could get set. A whistling right uppercut caught Carter under the chin, raised the burly bully a foot from the ground, and a straight right from the shoulder exploded squarely on his jutting chin as Carter was falling.

Wayne Morgan turned swiftly to face the little lawyer who was burdened with the two shell-studded belts, one in each small hand. Dave Fuller and Dan Dunstan were staring with open mouths, and Burleigh Carter was motionless on the platform.

The skin glove on Morgan's right hand was split across the knuckles, but Morgan was not even breathing hard. He waited for Jediah Thompson to speak, but the little lawyer shook his head and backed away.

"Don't you attack me, Morgan!" the lawyer blasted. "I had nothing to do with this brawl, and I warned Carter to keep on his guns!"

"Carter used his head," Dave Fuller interrupted. "He saved hisself from a killin'. Now yuh better get some water and slop him down!"

"Tell him to keep out of my way," Morgan warned the little lawyer. "That's twice he's brought fight to me, and the third time he might be unlucky."

"You attacked him without provocation," Thompson retorted. "When Carter regains consciousness, I shall advise him to swear out a warrant for your arrest!"

"Bob and I witnessed the fight," Dave Fuller told the lawyer. "Yuh won't have a chance in court."

"Morgan won't interfere if he is behind the bars," Thompson said, and that tipped his hand.

Wayne Morgan took a deep breath. "Yuh can find me at the hotel across the tracks," he told Thompson, and walked away with a jerk of his head for Fuller and Dunstan to follow him.

Back in the shadows of the freight depot, Morgan stopped and motioned for the two cowboys to come closer. Then he talked to them in a whisper.

"They've got nothin' on you and Dan," he told Fuller. "One of yuh go to the livery barn and change my saddle to a fast mountain hoss. I'm hittin' out for the hills, but you boys will have to stay to look after Sandra Blaine."

"They can't make that charge stick," Fuller objected, but Morgan cut him short.

"I'm a stranger here in town," he reminded. "They can throw me in jail and hold me until the trial. That's all Thompson wants, and I can't afford to lose that much time."

"By dogies, yuh're right, Wayne," Dunstan agreed. "Carter shucked his hardware because he knew yuh're faster than he is with a six-shooter. He meant to beat yuh up, and even if he lost, he had the lawyer for a witness. Light a shuck for the barn, Dave, and meet us under that old cottonwood tree behind the holdin' corrals where we load the cattle on the cars!"

DAVE FULLER left at a swift walk, and Dunstan gripped Morgan's arm and pointed toward the lights on the station platform. They could see Carter on his feet, strapping on his twin belts, and shaking his head groggily. He staggered a bit as he followed Jediah Thompson to the constable's office down the dusty street.

Dunstan spoke softly and led the way along the freight depot, through several corrals, and to the shelter of an old cottonwood.

"Meet us by that rock fill at the head of the gorge," he whispered to Morgan. "Yonder comes Dave with a Circle L hoss, and he's a good one."

"I'll be seein' yuh," Morgan answered, and a moment later he was heading for the hills at a high lope.

It was past midnight when he reached his own hide-out in the hills, and in some way known only to himself, Blue Hawk, his Yaqui companion, had known of his coming and been ready for him. Little escaped the keen eyes of the Yaqui in those wild, desolate hills, and he had soon told Wayne Morgan all he had found out since they last had met.

Worn out with his day's exertions, and his long night ride, Wayne Morgan had been

glad to turn in, for much work faced this man who played a dual rôle in the morning. Daylight would bring a fresh call on the Masked Rider.

Blue Hawk was preparing breakfast in the mouth of the big cave when Morgan sat up in his blanket and pulled on his scarred boots. He looked about curiously, for this was his first opportunity for a good look at the hide-out the Yaqui had chosen. And Blue Hawk, he thought, had done well—as he always did.

Living springs fed an underground stream which flowed through the big cave far back in the winding recesses. Natural fissures in the rocky roof carried off the smoke from the wood fire, and one man could have protected the cave against an army, as long as his ammunition held out.

Morgan ate leisurely and spent most of the morning resting, with his broad back against a stone slab. He listened as Blue Hawk again told him and in more detail of the movements of Brace Jordan and his trail wolves. Morgan's blue eyes lighted up when the Indian explained that he had seen Jordan riding alone to a secret cave not more than three miles from the one in which he and Morgan were sitting, and had followed.

"There is money and jewelry in the cave," Blue Hawk told Morgan. "There is also a selected pack of choice foods, such as a man would choose for a long journey."

Morgan knew then that Brace Jordan had either made up his mind to leave the mountain stronghold, or was toying with the idea. He cleaned his guns carefully, did some necessary mending of his saddle gear, and in the afternoon took a refreshing bath in a pool half-way back in the big cave.

"I have a hunch, Hawk," he told the patient Indian, "that tonight somebody will meet Brace Jordan to pay over the ransom money for Creighton Blaine. The Masked Rider will hide in that secret cave yuh found."

"Senor, he is fast with his guns," Blue Hawk warned gravely, then he smiled. "I have no fear if you are ready," he amended, and Morgan thanked him with an answering smile.

After an early meal of venison and corn bread, Morgan saddled the restive black stallion. He donned the long black cloak, adjusted his mask, and settled the twin guns in his holsters to his liking. Blue Hawk would take care of the horses while the Masked Rider was in Brace Jordan's secret hiding place, and he would also watch the trail from Longhorn to warn his companion of the approach of riders.

Blue Hawk led the way through a copse of timber, crossed a small stream, and pushed through a dense stand of brush. He pointed to a shaft of volcanic granite, explaining that a trail led up to the cave to which a man would have to make his way on foot.

The Masked Rider dismounted and handed the bridle reins to Blue Hawk. Telling the Indian to wait while he went ahead to reconnoiter, the Masked Rider picked his steps carefully and climbed the steep rocky trail. He came to the brush-choked entrance of a cave which might have been the entrance to a bear's den.

A MAN had to stoop to enter, but once inside, the high, vaulted ceiling could be seen but dimly in the half-light of the late afternoon. The Masked Rider found unmistakable signs of human habitation, and spent a half-hour familiarizing himself with the passageways running off from the main cave. He told himself that none but an Indian could have found Jordan's secret and solitary hiding place. When he had familiarized himself with the place he returned to the stream where he had left Blue Hawk.

"No matter what happens, do nothin' to interfere unless yuh get my signal," the Masked Rider told his faithful Indian companion. "Keep out of sight, but pick a place where yuh can watch the trails from both directions."

"You will stay here, Senor?" Blue Hawk asked anxiously, and the Masked Rider nodded.

"I'm not shore how Jordan's visitors will find him, but there'll be a way," he assured the Yaqui.

Blue Hawk rode away leading the stallion, and the Masked Rider climbed to a look-out shelf from which he could see in all directions. He watched Blue Hawk through his old field-glasses, knowing that the Yaqui could lose himself with all the cunning of his aboriginal ancestors, then settled down to his vigil.

It was an hour later when the Masked Rider saw something move on the trail to the north. Cupping his glasses to his eyes, he stared intently, and his nostrils began to quiver as a sign of mental excitement. Two men were riding down the trail, and the

hands of one of the men were tied to the horn of his saddle.

The Masked Rider sighed with relief. Brace Jordan was keeping his word. He was bringing Creighton Blaine down, evidently to the secret cave. Perhaps the outlaw meant to release Blaine when the ransom money was paid, and the fact that he was riding alone was evidence that he didn't trust the members of his gang.

Blaine was wearing his tweed riding suit, and he seemed none the worse for his captivity. When the two men crossed the little stream, the Masked Rider entered the cave and disappeared in one of the passageways leading off from the main cave.

Twilight was dimming the light when Brace Jordan entered the cave, pushing Blaine in front of him. He forced his prisoner to walk twenty paces to the rear of the place where he ordered Blaine to sit on the floor of the cave with his back against a stalagmite. Then Jordan passed a rope around the prisoner's arms and fastened the rope to the limestone mass. When a vague murmuring came from Blaine, the Masked Rider surmised that Jordan had gagged his victim.

"Don't make any noise if yuh want to live," the outlaw warned Blaine. "I expect visitors in an hour or so, and if they bring the money, I'll keep my part of the bargain!"

Jordan walked to the front of the cave and sat down to smoke a brown-paper quirly. Time passed, and darkness fell over the rugged mountains. Only the buzz of insects could be heard, and the soft murmur of water from an underground stream.

The Masked Rider leaned against the limestone wall with his muscles relaxed. He must remain unknown to Creighton Blaine. Then the Masked Rider heard the thin wavering cry of a mountain lion—Blue Hawk's signal to him. That meant that someone was coming up the trail from Longhorn.

He heard Brace Jordan stir and walk outside. Then he heard the outlaw's boots going down the steep trail, and a few minutes later, the voice of a man shouted a ringing call in a vaguely familiar voice.

"Jordan! Dave Fuller callin'! We brought what yuh was expectin'!"

The Masked Rider frowned in the darknes. Could Fuller's companion be Sandra Blaine? If so, how had she and Fuller found their way to Jordan's hide-out. Then the Masked Rider heard Jordan's answer, and a gruff command to someone to keep his hands up high.

The voices sounded muffled with distance, and the Masked Rider guessed shrewdly that the outlaw had met his visitors on the far bank of the little stream. Undoubtedly he would disarm Dave Fuller there.

IN A little while the Masked Rider heard the crunch of boots on the hidden trail marked by the granite shaft. He drew a quick breath when he heard the voice of Sandra Blaine. She was explaining that she had made a quick trip to Austin, and asked if her father was safe.

"He's safe enough," Jordan answered, and lighted a lantern which he set against the wall inside, to the right of the entrance. "Did yuh bring the dinero?"

"I brought it," the girl answered bravely, and a bit defiantly. "I hid it, though, until I see my father. I refused to deal with Burleigh Carter, but Jediah Thompson gave us directions how to find you."

"I don't trust Carter, either," Jordan grunted. "He picked a fight with that gunswift, Wayne Morgan. I learned about it from Thompson. And what's more, I don't trust that lawyer!"

The Masked Rider listened, and wondered why Dave Fuller had nothing to say. He smiled when Fuller finally spoke gruffly.

"Yuh seem to know everything, Jordan, but how do we know yuh'll release Creighton Blaine after Sandra pays yuh the money?"

"Yuh have my word for it," Jordan answered with quiet dignity.

"I guess we'll have to trust yore word," Fuller answered, after a pause. "Where yuh holdin' Blaine?"

"Right here in this cave," Jordan answered. "He'll never finish that spur railroad, and the Valley Association will never get their cattle drive through the gorge to Longhorn. You might pass the word along to save trouble. Now let's see the color of the ransom money!"

"Let's see Creighton Blaine first!" Fuller insisted stubbornly.

Jordan's lips twisted in a sneer.

"It sounds like you don't trust me," he said. "I want to be sure that you've got the money ready at hand."

"When my father's life is at stake," Sandra Blaine broke in, "I trust nobody. That's final. I'll have to ask you to lead us to my father, Jordan. At once!"

CHAPTER XI

When Thieves Fall Out

IN A moment the Masked Rider heard the scrape of boots again, then the lantern was picked up. Without speaking, Brace Jordan led the way through the cave, passing within a dozen feet of the hidden Masked Rider.

Sandra Blaine gasped when she saw her father, and her voice was hysterical as she called to him.

"Dad! Oh, Dad! You're safe! I brought the money as you told me to in your note. We'll soon have you safe in Longhorn!"

When Blaine made no answer, the Masked Rider saw her drop to her knees beside the bound man. She pulled the bandanna gag from his mouth, and Creighton Blaine spoke quietly.

"I knew you'd do what was necessary, Sandra honey, but I don't know if it is worth it. If we can't get the cattle through and finish the railroad, we will all be ruined."

"That's right," Jordan agreed ironically. "There is big money behind the Syndicate, and they also have the best lawyers money can buy. And they mean to win out here!"

"You mean Jediah Thompson is such a fine lawyer?" Blaine asked scornfully.

"He's just the local rep," Jordan answered in the same tone. "Yuh'll find out about that soon enough, but right now we've got some unfinished business. Do yuh want us to turn our heads while yuh dig up the cash, Miss Blaine?"

Sandra Blaine flushed, but did not deign to answer as she turned her back. She fumbled with the buttons of her flannel shirt, shrugged several times and though the Masked Rider's own head was turned aside he knew that she was taking off a soft leather money-belt which she must have worn next to her smooth skin.

After removing the money-belt, Sandra rearranged her clothing, and told the two men they could turn around. The Masked Rider's eyes glistened through the eyeholes in his mask when the lantern light caught the sheen of burnished metal from the outlaw's twin six-shooters.

Sandra Blaine opened the belt and withdrew several thick packets of crisp new bills. Brace Jordan growled when he took a pack and noted the denomination.

"Thousand-dollar bills!" he barked. "And every one of 'em marked with the numbers recorded!"

"Yes," Sandra answered soberly. "All except this five thousand which I got in fifties and one hundreds. I thought you might need some smaller bills for traveling."

Brace Jordan glanced up quickly and stared at the pretty girl. Then the corners of his mouth twitched as he smiled.

"I didn't say I was going any place," he remarked quietly.

"But you can't spend money back here in the Bondrios," Sandra reasoned logically. "What you do is no concern of mine, but now I will thank you to liberate my father!"

Brace Jordan shook his dark head. He stepped back with one hand on his holstered gun, spoke curtly to Dave Fuller.

"Untie Blaine, cowboy. I'm a man of my word, and Blaine is now a free man. And when yuh get back to Calaveras, tell Wayne Morgan he better not try to make that drive through the gorge."

Dave Fuller threw off the ropes and helped Creighton Blaine to his feet. Then he turned slowly and faced the tall outlaw.

"I'll tell Morgan, but it won't change his mind any," he declared. "And if yuh make an attempt to interfere with our drive, I'm bettin' Morgan will ride gun-sign on yuh!"

"I wish I was shore I could depend on that," Jordan said, and his voice held a note of wistfulness. "I've never been beaten to the gun, and four other bounty-hunters have tried to earn that reward on my head."

"Davey, please!" Sandra interrupted. "Now that father is free, let's get away from this spooky place!"

"I'll take my six-shooter, Jordan," Fuller said to the outlaw. "Yuh needn't worry about me tryin' to match yore draw. I know I can't do it, but I want some protection ridin' these mountain trails back to town."

"I wasn't worryin'," Jordan answered with a scornful smile. "Just keepin' yuh honest, is all. Yuh'll find yore gun tied to yore saddle, with the loads drawn. Yuh'll also find Blaine's hoss tied near the trail, and yuh're free to go."

"Thanks," Fuller said dryly and, taking Sandra by the arm, he started for the mouth of the cave.

SANDRA took her father's arm, and Jordan picked up the lantern. He bowed as

the girl lowered her head and stepped into the cool night air. From his hiding place, the Masked Rider could hear the crunch of boots as the three went down the steep trail to the horses.

In only a little while Brace Jordan returned to the cave. At the entrance he waited until the sounds of hoofs told him that his guests had crossed the stream and had started for Longhorn. Then the handsome outlaw lowered the wick of the lantern until it made a faint yellow light and turned back into the cave's interior.

The Masked Rider watched Jordan approach the place where he had tied Creighton Blaine to the huge stalagmite of frosted limestone. Jordan sat the lantern on the floor of the cave, reached up to a high shelf, and took down a steel dispatch case.

Confident that he was unobserved, the outlaw fitted a key to the lock and opened the lid. He placed the ransom money in a deep tray, and picked up a ring set with a large diamond. The Masked Rider was sure he had seen that ring on Creighton Blaine's left hand the day he had met the railroad builder, the same day Wayne Morgan had signed on with the Circle L under old Bob Lee.

Jordan held his hand to catch the light from the lantern. The big diamond gleamed with myriad lights, reflecting all the colors of the spectrum.

A soft deep voice spoke from the darkness.

"Reach for the roof, Brace Jordan!"

The outlaw leaped to his feet, whirling as he came erect, and his right hand flashed down to the gun in his right holster. Then his clawing fingers fell away from the gun as he stared into the gaping muzzle of a gun pointing at his broad chest.

"You! The Masked Rider!"

His words were a whisper to tell of his utter and complete surprise. The Masked Rider nodded, indicating with a wave of his left hand for Jordan to step away from the dispatch case.

Brace Jordan obeyed, but his nose was quivering. He stared at the Masked Rider with fury in his dark eyes.

"Yuh don't dare take a chance," he said huskily. "Yuh're an owlhooter the same as me, but yuh know I've got yuh faded on the draw!"

"Set down!" the Masked Rider ordered sternly. "With yore back against that glitterin' icicle!"

Brace Jordan turned his head to hide the little smile that curled his full lips. He sat down where Creighton Blaine had sat, and his right hand slithered down to his gun in the open holster. The six-shooter cleared leather with a hiss just as the barrel of another heavy pistol struck Jordan smartly on the side of the head.

The Masked Rider sighed and holstered his six-shooter after lowering the pronged hammer. Then he picked up the short rope and passed it around the unconscious outlaw's arms. After making a tie behind the stalagmite, the Masked Rider picked up the dispatch case and stretched to his feet.

He knew that Brace Jordan would regain consciousness within minutes, and with a little effort the outlaw could free himself from the rope which fettered his powerful arms. The Masked Rider raised the chimney of the lantern, blew out the light, and made his way to the mouth of the cave in the velvety darkness.

At the bottom of the trail, a hushed voice spoke in a whisper.

"Senor? Someone rides up the trail from the east!"

The Masked Rider stepped into the deeper shadows to join the watchful Yaqui. Blue Hawk told him that he had seen the two men ride away with Sandra Blaine, and the Masked Rider handed the dispatch case to the Yaqui, telling him to keep it safely.

"I have a feelin' I know who the rider is who comes from Longhorn," the Masked Rider whispered. "Wait for me across the stream, and don't interfere or show yoreself if yuh hear shootin'!"

"But Senor," Blue Hawk protested, "do you return to the cave again? He is still there, and as I have told you he is fast with the gun!"

"He won't see me," the Masked Rider answered quietly. "Now yuh must hurry."

THE Masked Rider again climbed the rocky trail and listened just outside the entrance to the screened cave. He could hear a soft rustling, then a muttered oath. Brace Jordan had regained consciousness, and was trying to free himself of the rope.

The Masked Rider worked his way into the brush, and hugged the cool stone wall of the cave. He was sure that he could not have been seen even in daylight, and only a silvery glow from the stars lighted the piles of volcanic rock.

The scratch of a match inside the cave announced that Jordan had liberated himself, and the Masked Rider smiled when he heard a familiar sound. Evidently the first thing Brace Jordan had done was to check the loads in his twin guns.

The Masked Rider parted the brush screen an inch and peered within the cave. Brace Jordan was lighting the lantern, which he turned low.

Then the outlaw straightened up and slapped for his right-hand gun. Several times he repeated the practise movement, and the Masked Rider watched with admiration. Brace Jordan was just about the fastest gun-swift the Masked Rider had ever seen.

"Hello, Jordan!"

The Masked Rider jerked involuntarily when a guarded voice shouted from out in the darkness. He saw Brace Jordan slither into a side passage, and the outlaw's hand slapped down like a striking snake and drew his gun. Then a smile twitched Jordan's lips as the call was repeated.

The Masked Rider also recognized that guarded voice as Burleigh Carter repeated his call. Jordan retraced his steps, picked up the lantern, and carried it back into the side passageway with him. Then he retraced his steps in the semi-gloom, and the Masked Rider drew back and crouched low behind his brush screen.

Brace Jordan came to the opening, stared out for a moment.

It was obvious that the man trusted absolutely nobody. Despite his swift ability with a six-gun, he did not mean to be caught napping, and now he stood with the weapon cocked in his hand. He stood for long, waiting.

No sound came from outside the cave. If it were Burleigh Carter out there, he was just as suspicious as Jordan. And evidently the visitor was hiding in the rock and brush, waiting for Jordan's move.

Jordan drew back into the gloom of the cave. Picking up a rock, he threw it outside.

"Is that you, Jordan?" Carter's voice called loudly. "Why don't you say something? I can't wait here forever."

Jordan again appeared at the opening.

"I hear yuh, Carter," he called softly. "What do yuh want?"

"My cut of the dinero," Carter answered gruffly. "How do yuh get up to that hideout?"

"Stay where yuh are," Jordan ordered. "And don't try any tricks with me. I'm comin' down!"

The brush parted, and Jordan passed so close that the Masked Rider could have touched him with an outstretched hand. Boots scuffed on the trail, there was a moment of silence, then the Masked Rider could hear voices at the foot of the trail.

After a pause the crunch of boots was heard again, and the two men came up the steep trail side by side. Only Jordan knew the way, and he wasn't trusting Carter to walk behind him. Jordan parted the brush hiding the entrance to the cave, motioned for Carter to enter, and followed the man inside.

"Yuh've got a light in here," Carter said in a muffled voice. "Turn it up so's we can talk."

"Good idea," Jordan agreed.

Walking to the passageway, he picked up the lantern, turned up the wick, brought it out and set it in the middle of the front cave.

"Now talk," he told Carter.

"That Blaine gal wouldn't give me the ransom money," Carter began bluntly. "She gave me the slip while I was talkin' to that

[*Turn page*]

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"

Without Painful Backache

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

law-sharp, Jed Thompson. Then I heard that she rode out of town with young Dave Fuller, and I put two and two together."

"Yeah?" Jordan answered slowly. "And what answer did yuh come up with?"

"I know the answer," Carter said, more bluntly. "Only the lawyer and me knew about this hide-out. Thompson kept me talkin' while the gal rode up here to meet you and get her old man. It was my idea to kidnap old man Blaine, and I was to get half of the ransom, and you know it!"

CHAPTER XII

Fifth Notch

JORDAN faced Carter in the yellow glow from the lantern. He studied the Syndicate man carefully, noting the twin six-shooters in the open holsters tied low on Carter's thick legs. Then the outlaw asked a question.

"Do yuh know the Masked Rider?"

Carter jerked up his head with a short laugh.

"I've heard about the Masked Rider," he said slowly. "I'm not tellin' my guesses to anyone else, but I'm satisfied myself that the Masked Rider and Brace Jordan are the same man!"

"Funny about that," Jordan said quietly. "I was puttin' one and one together myself. I was beginnin' to believe that the Masked Rider and Burleigh Carter were the same man, at least down here in the Bondrios."

"Come again, Jordan," Carter said roughly. "What yuh gettin' at?"

"I don't trust yuh, Carter," Jordan admitted frankly. "If yuh wanted to collect bounty, why didn't yuh do it when I was knocked out?"

"And I don't trust you," Carter retorted. "Framin' with that lawyer to keep me busy while the gal rides back here and pays yuh off. What's this talk about yuh bein' knocked out? You, the great Brace Jordan?"

"Where's the money?" Jordan asked quietly.

"Yeah, where's the money?" Carter echoed. "Are yuh trying to give me the old doublecross?"

"Look, Carter," Jordan said, and now his voice was thin and menacing. "That fifty grand was my trail stake, and yuh knew it, yuh sneaking' coyote. Yuh slipped in here and hid back in that passageway where I had the lantern!"

Burleigh Carter stared at the outlaw, and the muscles in his shoulders began to tense. The Masked Rider made himself thin against the wall of the cave, watching with fascinated interest. He knew what was coming, but he made no effort to interfere.

Brace Jordan was watching Carter without winking, and his dark eyes changed to a glowing red. His lips barely moved when he spoke softly.

"Yuh'd sell yore brother for a price, Carter. Yuh came back here to make yoreself Mr. Big down at Longhorn. Yuh're the fifth man who has tried to collect the bounty on my scalp!"

Carter stared and listened, and realized that he was in a trap. There was no escape except by the gun route, but Carter's cunning mind worked swiftly.

His body shifted swiftly to the left as his right hand slapped down for his holstered gun on that side. Then his left fist pistoned out and clipped Brace Jordan smartly on the chin. Carter sidestepped just as Jordan's gun cleared leather, and his right fist thudded against the outlaw's jaw.

The Masked Rider saw Jordan's gun clear leather, and the six-shooter exploded just as Carter's blow landed.

Brace Jordan dropped like a pole-axed steer, falling face-forward. Burleigh Carter staggered back, tried to catch his balance, then broke at the knees. He moaned softly as his body settled limply to the rocky floor of the cave, and the Masked Rider caught up with his breathing.

Carter's legs stretched out, and his boots began to rattle spasmodically. Then they came to rest, and the Masked Rider stretched to his feet and left his hiding place.

He needed no examination to tell him that Carter was dead. The Masked Rider was no lawman, and Brace Jordan would recover his senses within a matter of minutes.

The Masked Rider did not enter the cave. He settled his guns and made his way down the trail, crossed the little stream, and whistled softly. Blue Hawk answered, and came from the shadows leading Midnight.

"The Syndicate man is dead?" Blue Hawk asked, but it was not actually a question.

"Yes," the Masked Rider answered. "Both

those fellows thought the other one was the Masked Rider. We ride back to our hide-out now, Hawk, and Wayne Morgan will make an early start for Calaveras."

The Masked Rider turned after they had ridden a short distance. He glanced back at the cave of death, but no light showed the hidden entrance. Brace Jordan was alone with the fifth notch on his gun.

* * * * *

DAN Dunstan rode out to meet Wayne Morgan at the east end of the deep gorge where the big fill was the scene of activity. A track-laying gang was working under the direction of Tim Clancy, and shining steel rails were probing toward the southwest, glittering in the early Texas sun.

"We've got a surprise for yuh!" young Dunstan shouted to Morgan. "Sandra got the money for the ransom and Creighton Blaine is safe! There he is now, workin' with the surveyors and engineers!"

Morgan simulated surprise and rode over to shake hands with Blaine. The railroad builder greeted Morgan with quiet dignity, showing no ill effects from his recent experience. His daughter Sandra and Dave Fuller joined the group, and after explanations had been made, Fuller asked Morgan a leading question.

"Where was you last night, Wayne?"

Wayne Morgan smiled and waved his hand at the towering mountains.

"Ridin' around," he answered vaguely. "I saw Burleigh Carter ridin' up the trail from town, but he didn't see me."

"Did you and Carter tangle?" Fuller asked, and rushed on before Morgan could answer, "Carter didn't come back to Longhorn, and Jediah Thompson hinted that you might have bushwhacked him."

"I heard in two-three places that the Masked Rider was ridin' last night," Morgan answered slowly. "He might know somethin' about Carter. We ain't got much time to stop right now and jaw about it, I reckon. What we've got to do is get back to Calaveras and start the drive up the old trail."

Creighton Blaine nodded and grim lines of determination appeared in his weathered face. Sandra appeared serious and subdued.

"That drive is our last chance, Morgan," Blaine said earnestly. "We can finish this spur line within thirty days if we can get the men and materials, but we can't get either one unless we can pay for what we have already used. Everything depends on the success of the drive, and I'm sure you will do your best."

Morgan nodded, thinking of the treasure in his saddle-bags. His reference to the Masked Rider had taken suspicion away from himself, but he did not want to be questioned any more and was glad when Dave Fuller suggested that they better be riding along.

All that day Morgan rode with Dan Dunstan while Dave Fuller kept close to Sandra Blaine. Nightfall found them fifteen miles from Calaveras, and it was Sandra who suggested that they rest their horses and have supper, then ride into Calaveras Valley under the new moon.

"Good idea," Morgan agreed heartily. "That'll give Bob Lee a chance to get word to the crews, and we can start movin' the herds early in the mornin'."

The little party made a supper camp near a new bridge across the deep gorge, and Fuller explained that the bridge would cut thirty miles from the old road along the twisting trails. A tall angular man was guarding one end of the bridge. Morgan recognized Olaf Thorsen from the bandanna sling which still supported the hard-rock man's right arm. He strolled down to speak to Olaf.

"Bob Lee bane lookin' for you, Mr. Morgan," the big Norwegian told him. "I tank he start movin' dose cattle tomorrow."

Morgan talked a while, but he was still thinking of the ransom money in his saddle-bags. Thorsen had dropped the information that the section crews were getting uneasy about their pay, and were demanding their money. Sandra Blaine could not hide the worry which clouded her pretty face, and it was evident that the worry had been nagging at her for some time since plainly she needed sleep.

The sickle moon was riding high when the little party saddled their horses and rode across the bridge. Morgan heard Sandra talking to Dave Fuller about the desperate need for raising money to pay the railroad workers. He heard Dan Dunstan wondering if Rosemary Lee would be waiting up. Wayne Morgan grinned as a plan began to form in the back of his mind.

Lights were showing in the big ranchhouse as the party rode into the Circle L yard. Two chuckwagons were backed against the pole corrals, and old Bob Lee was giving orders to the cooks. He turned as Morgan and Dunstan walked their weary horses across

the yard, and Morgan could make out the blanketed forms of sleeping cowboys near the hay stacks.

ROSEMARY came from the house to learn what was new from young Dan Dunstan, while the elder Dunstan and Lee talked to Morgan about the big cattle drive. Sandra and Fuller said they would put up their horses, and Morgan began to strip his own gear while young Dunstan was telling about the fight in Longhorn.

Wayne Morgan turned his horse into a pole corral, carried his saddle to a hitching-rail at the side of the big ranchhouse, then walked into the deep shadows by the house. The windows were open on the ground floor, and the big house seemed deserted.

Morgan moved swiftly then, like a man who knows exactly what he is doing, and he headed toward room which was next to the one occupied by Rosemary Lee. Hugging the side of the house, Morgan felt inside the open window. Then he ran back to the tie-rail whistling softly, turned his saddle skirts to catch the air, and rejoined the older men, Bob Lee and Joe Dunstan.

"We can make the drive in six days with that new bridge in," Bob Lee was saying, mapping out his plans for the drive. "The only thing that worries me is payin' the section-hands. The cowboys'll wait for their money, but we'd be in a tight if the laborers quit us now."

Morgan merely listened, and made no comment. Dunstan said that they would start moving at daybreak, and they had better turn in and get what sleep they could. Lights began to show in the bedrooms. Suddenly every man in the big yard turned swiftly as a girl's startled scream came from the house.

"That sounded like Sandra!" Bob Lee shouted, and started running toward the house.

Wayne Morgan grinned in the darkness, taking his time. He was the last to enter the big front room where all the rest had gathered and where Sandra Blaine and Rosemary Lee were talking excitedly. Sandra held a steel dispatch case in her hands, and she handed a piece of soiled paper to old Bob Lee.

"The Masked Rider has saved us!" she babbled excitedly. "He must have been here tonight while we were all out in the yard. Read the message, Uncle Bob!"

Old Bob Lee stared at the soiled paper, swallowed hard, and began to read the printed message that was addressed to Sandra Blaine. It read:

Miss Sandra Blaine

You will find the ransom money in Brace Jordan's dispatch box. Jordan killed Carter in a shoot-out at that place where you paid over the money. Send the rest of what you will find in the box to the Widow's Fund with the compliments of

The Masked Rider

"By dogies!" Bob Lee whispered. "Now we can pay them section hands! But how in tarnation did the Masked Rider get in here without bein' seen?"

"You forget it was pitch-dark until the sickle moon came up, Dad," Rosemary reminded. "And all of us were busy getting ready for tomorrow."

"He did this for me and Dad," Sandra murmured. "I could kiss the Masked Rider for this wonderful gift!"

"Won't I do as a substitute?" Dave Fuller asked, and flushed to the roots of his hair when Sandra kissed him full on the lips.

"Ain't that yore father's ring on top of the money?" Bob Lee asked.

Sandra nodded. "Yes, but this other jewelry must have been stolen as well," she answered. "And there is nearly fifteen thousand dollars here that does not belong to us."

"That goes to the Widows' Fund," Bob Lee said.

Wayne Morgan turned when a big hand touched his arm. He had been listening, and watching the play of emotions on the faces of the excited crowd, and he was surprised to see stocky Till Burdock studying his own face closely. He had forgotten about Burdock who had evidently recovered from his exposure to the deadly Texas fever.

"You wasn't actin' as messenger for the Masked Rider, was yuh, Morgan?" Burdock asked.

YOUNG Dan Dunstan was instantly at Morgan's side.

"It couldn't have been!" he answered Burdock. "Morgan has been with me every minute of the time, and old Bob will say the same thing. You must still be out of yore head, old-timer!"

"Does anyone ever know what the Masked Rider will do?" Sandra Blaine asked. "And does it make any difference how he works his magic? We should all be thankful for

this gift he has sent us. I, for one, am deeply grateful!"

"Mebbe we ought to get this settled," Morgan said quietly, as he watched Tillman Burdock's heavy face. "What has Burdock been doin' while we were away?"

"I've been bogged down on bed-ground," Burdock answered gruffly. "My room ain't far from Sandra's, and I thought I heard somebody in the dark outside the house not long ago!"

"That must have been when the Masked Rider slipped in," Morgan suggested. "The best place to hide is in a crowd."

"I wasn't hidin'," Burdock blurted angrily. "I was gatherin' my strength to help with the drive!"

"Which starts in about four hours," Morgan reminded with a smile.

"There'll be trouble, I tell yuh," Till Burdock insisted. "Brace Jordan won't rest until he squares up with this Masked Rider."

"Which is just fine for us," Dave Fuller interrupted. "If Jordan is riding gun-sign on the Masked Rider, he won't have near so much time to interfere with our drive."

"Goodnight, folks," Wayne Morgan said quietly. "I'm goin' to make up some shut-eye. I'll see yuh all at the chuckwagon at the crack of dawn."

Till Burdock stared at the tall, powerful cowboy as Morgan left the room and walked to the bunkhouse where he had rolled his blankets. Muttering to himself, Burdock went back to his room, and soon the big house was quiet.

Wayne Morgan pulled off his boots and clothing and rolled up in his blankets. He was asleep almost at once. . . .

Morgan blinked drowsily when a big hand touched his shoulder. Big Charley Bowie grinned down at him and asked him if he was going to sleep all day.

Morgan glanced at the gray sky through the window.

"It don't take a man long to spend the night on this outfit," Morgan complained, and he could hear the sounds of activity out in the big yard. "How's that sore arm?" he asked Bowie.

"Healed up and haired over," the big cowboy answered with a grin. "It just gives me a good excuse to get out of the hard work. . . . Don't say anything out loud, but you and me are carryin' the pay-roll to keep them section-hands on the job. Old Bob said to break it to yuh gentle. I've got hosses ready, and we'll hit out right after we get a bait of hot grub."

CHAPTER XIII

Battle for the Bridge

RIGHT after Morgan and Big Charley had eaten a hot breakfast, they left the Circle L. Morgan was deeply thoughtful. Fifty thousand dollars was again in his saddle-bags.

He could hear the steers bellowing toward the southeast where he knew the cowboys had herded the cattle off of bed-ground, and were stringing the herd out to start the all-important drive to Longhorn.

Sandra Blaine rode out to meet them as they passed the big house, and she came close to whisper to Morgan.

"There is five thousand in small bills to pay the crew in the cut just outside of Calaveras," she explained. "You'll have to take the rest of the money to Dad in Longhorn. He can make arrangements with the bank to change the big bills. And if you do see the Masked Rider, give him my love."

"Yes'm," Morgan answered quietly, but his blue eyes studied the pretty girl's face intently. "I'll remember what yuh said, but the way Dave Fuller is glarin' at me now makes me right uncomfortable. If I don't see the Masked Rider, could I give yore message to Dave?"

Sandra flushed rosily and turned her horse. Charley Bowie chuckled and waved a hand at Fuller. Then he and Morgan rode away and mended their pace just as the sun broke over the high peaks of the Bondrios Mountains.

"I thought there for a minute that gal was goin' to kiss yuh, Wayne," Bowie bantered. "And if she had, yuh'd have had Dave Fuller to whup. He told me about that scuffle yuh had with Burleigh Carter up in Longhorn."

Morgan shrugged, and asked about the tick-infested herd off to the south. Bowie said that the cattle had wandered back the way they had come, but that some of the half-grown boys from the valley were guarding the big dip-filled ditch just for safety.

"Till Burdock don't like you, Morgan," Big Charley said abruptly. "He knows about you and me carrying the pay-rolls, and he wanted to go along just to make shore nothin' happened."

Morgan turned slowly in the saddle to look at Bowie's tanned face. Big Charley jerked his head slightly, and Morgan saw Till Burdock coming up fast on a deep-chested roan.

"Talk of the devil and hear his chains a-rattlin'," Bowie remarked.

Morgan greeted the stocky cattleman pleasantly, and then they were at the tool-shack at the far end of the deep cut. The section-hands were standing around listening to their foreman who was pleading for them to take their tools and get to work. Morgan listened as one big laborer announced that they would start work when they saw the color of some real money.

Morgan dismounted and reached into one of his saddle-bags. Then he walked to the young foreman and handed him a package.

"Pay these men off and tell 'em Creighton Blaine is back on the job," he told the foreman, and stepped back to watch.

The foreman stripped off the paper covering the money, made the announcement, and told the men to come up and receive their over-due wages. There were tremendous shouts as the men formed a line.

When Morgan and Bowie finally rode away, the click of steel rails and sledges rang musically through the low hills.

"What became of Burdock?" Morgan asked, and Big Charley said that the stocky cattleman had ridden on ahead.

"Said he had some business in Longhorn, and that he'd make arrangements at that end to load the cattle in the cars," Bowie answered carelessly.

They rode on, and before long were drawing near the bridge of which Bowie had spoken. Big Charley drew his six-shooter and inspected the loads. He glanced at Morgan who was carrying his thirty-gun across the pommel of his saddle, and Bowie grinned as he added to his own fire-power.

"If there's goin' to be trouble," he said casually, "it'll come at the new bridge cut-off. I was thinkin' mebbe we better ride acey-deucey, Wayne."

Morgan nodded because he had been thinking the same thing. He was also wondering about Till Burdock who had as much to lose as any cattleman in the valley. What urgent business was taking Burdock to Longhorn at such a critical time when every experienced man was needed for the big cattle drive?

"I'll go ahead," Bowie said in his slow drawl. "You bring up the drag, and we can team up again after we get across the new bridge."

"If we are goin' to divide our target, we might as well divide the money," Morgan suggested, and in so doing, told the big cowboy that he trusted him all the way. Charley Bowie flushed with pleasure at the unspoken compliment.

MORGAN reached into one of his saddle-bags, drew out two thick pockets of currency and, riding close to Bowie, he slipped the money into Big Charley's saddle-bags.

"These canyon walls might have eyes," Morgan explained quietly. "In case I don't catch yuh up at the bridge, ride on in to Longhorn and report to Creighton Blaine. Start on, and I'll give yuh a ten-minute lead before I foller."

Big Charley nodded and gigged his stout horse with a blunted spur. The new bridge across the gorge would cut off thirty miles of the drive from Calaveras to Longhorn, and would save three days. Morgan and Bowie had both expressed the same worry that had plagued them all morning. The new bridge was the most vulnerable and vital point on the long trail.

When Bowie had disappeared far up ahead, Wayne Morgan turned his horse and rode into the trailside brush. He was not surprised when the faint and guarded cry of a mountain lion came from a copse of scrub-oak on a little shelving mesa which overlooked the broad lower trail.

Morgan did not answer the call. He turned into a faintly-marked deer trail and slanted toward the look-out mesa. A few minutes later he was greeted softly by a familiar voice.

"Senor, the outlaws ride last night. They mean to destroy the new bridge across Deep River!"

Morgan listened as Blue Hawk told him of stealing close to the camp of the outlaws. He had followed them down from the high Bondrios, had listened as Brace Jordan had given orders to his dwindling force of men. Joe Turner and Sam Patch would lead the attack against the men making the big cattle drive, while Jordan had vowed that he would take care of Wayne Morgan personally.

Morgan listened as he dismounted and donned the long black cloak and mask of the Masked Rider. The black stallion muzzled his shoulder, and the Indian voiced

Morgan's unspoken thought.

"Do you think this Brace Jordan suspects that the Masked Rider and Wayne Morgan are the same?"

"Don't think out loud, Blue Hawk," the Masked Rider warned quietly, as he mounted the black. "Keep out of sight, but meet me with the Circle L hoss about two miles east of the bridge. Now I must ride fast to settle a score."

The Masked Rider left the brushy mesa and rode swiftly toward the east. The destiny of the Longhorn railroad was in his hands, or perhaps in the hands of Brace Jordan. According to Blue Hawk, the outlaw band was to take or destroy the new bridge where Olaf Thorsen and the two guards had been posted.

The big stallion raced along the mountain trail, sure-footed as a goat. The Masked Rider, watching the lower trail for some sign of Charley Bowie, saw the big Texan and the new bridge at the same time.

The Masked Rider reined in to watch as Big Charley approached the vital span. Thorsen and the two guards were not visible, but the Masked Rider saw something else that brought his rifle swiftly to his shoulder. He had a feeling that he had seen the same thing once before, and then the Masked Rider knew that Jordan's trail wolves had already struck.

On a shelf high above the canyon trail, a man was gripping the handles of a battery-box with both hands—just as Olaf Thorsen had gripped a similar box the day Wayne Morgan had signed on with the Circle L. Only this man was a stranger, and at a given signal, he was going to destroy the new bridge.

Charley Bowie called to Thorsen down on the lower trail. The Masked Rider could hear his voice faintly, and he saw the outlaw get ready to push the plunger which would detonate the charge of explosives.

The Masked Rider fined his sights and squeezed off a shot. The outlaw screamed and pitched from the high shelf, but the Masked Rider was already changing his position. He had a fleeting glimpse of Charley Bowie whirling his horse and diving from the saddle at the same time, and a half dozen rifles barked savagely to tell of the rage of the hidden outlaws back in the trailside brush.

The Masked Rider retraced his way along the hidden trail and pouched the rifle in the saddle-scabbard under his left leg. Then he did a sudden and unexpected thing when he stepped quickly from saddle and slapped Midnight lightly with his right hand. The stallion did not falter in stride as the Masked Rider hugged the brush, and the great black horse stopped just outside a little grassy pocket concealed from the lower trail.

NOW the Masked Rider was following the intelligent horse, slipping through the brush like a stalking Apache. He was off to one side when a deep, triumphant voice commanded:

"Stand and deliver!"

The Masked Rider moved like a phantom. He parted the brush at right angles from the place where Midnight had stopped. Brace Jordan was facing Midnight with a cocked six-shooter in his right hand. Midnight walked into the clearing, and the outlaw stared his unbelief.

"Holster yore hardware!" the Masked Rider ordered sternly.

Brace Jordan froze instantly, but he did not turn to face the owner of that menacing voice. His gun disappeared in leather, and he waited for further orders. When none came, Jordan turned slowly.

The Masked Rider stood just inside the clearing with his back to the brush. His elbows held the long black cloak aside and both hands were hooked in the crossed gun-belts on his lean hips.

Brace Jordan stared his unbelief. He had expected a brace of six-shooters to confront him, but evidently the Robin Hood outlaw was going to give him a fighting chance. Jordan repeated what he had said in the hide-out cave where Sandra Blaine had delivered the ransom money.

"There ain't room enough for both of us in these hills!"

The Masked Rider made no answer—just stared coldly through the slits in his silk mask. He did nod slightly, and Brace Jordan took the movement as the go-ahead.

The outlaw slapped down with his right hand with the desperate speed of long practise. His fingers twined around the grips of his gun as the burnished weapon leaped from the oiled holster.

The Masked Rider flipped his right hand sideward with thumb notching back the pronged hammer on the draw. His six-shooter bellowed thunderously as the muzzle shouted across the lip of the holster.

Brace Jordan grunted and took a backward step. He tried to catch his balance, but the battering force of the .45 slug was too powerful. The six-shooter dropped from his hand as his feet pattered backward in retreat, then the outlaw disappeared as though he had stepped into a deep hole.

The Masked Rider took a forward step involuntarily. He leaned forward to listen, and the fighting light died in his blue eyes as a heavy thud came from the trail far below.

The Masked Rider ejected the spent shell from his six-shooter, thumbed a fresh cartridge through the loading gate, and pouched the heavy weapon. He crossed the clearing, mounted Midnight, and rode like the wind in an effort to erase the memory of that sickening fall.

Ten minutes later he answered a faint cry off to the right—the hunting call of the mountain lion. A moment later he met Blue Hawk and stripped off the mask and black cloak which he handed to the Yaqui.

"You killed Brace Jordan?" Blue Hawk asked quietly.

It was Wayne Morgan who now faced Blue Hawk, but the same regretful expression was etched deeply on Morgan's tanned face, and reflected in his somber blue eyes that had characterized the Masked Rider.

"He stepped backward from the little mesa," Morgan told the Indian. "I'm goin' now, Hawk. Wait for me at the cave where Jordan killed Burleigh Carter!"

Morgan could hear the sporadic bark of rifles on the lower trail as he rode through the deer trails. He came to a little board shack where Olaf Thorsen slept with his guards, and then Morgan slipped from the saddle and approached the shack on foot. One lanky man was guarding the shack while listening to the sounds of battle on the other side of the new bridge.

Wayne Morgan drew his right-hand gun and slipped up behind the shack. The outlaw on guard was Sam Patch. He dropped like a log as Morgan brought a heavy six-shooter down on his head.

Morgan kicked a stout timber away from the barred door, and Olaf Thorsen came tumbling out of the shack with his left hand raised. The Norwegian shouted when he recognized Morgan, and the two other guards came barging out of the shack.

"Where are yore rifles?" Morgan asked the hard-rock man crisply.

"Jumpin' yimminy!" Thorsen shouted. "I bane see dat Sam Patch throw dem in da tool-box!"

THE big Norwegian raced to a tool-box and threw back the lid. The other two guards followed him, and Thorsen shouted again when he picked his rifle. One of the guards was tying the unconscious outlaw's hands, as Morgan gave a swift order.

"Get yore guns and foller me! We might get a few of Jordan's trail wolves, and mebbe save big Charley Bowie!"

Morgan called for caution as he crept through the brush toward the bridge. He smiled grimly when he heard a rifle bark steadily, answered by at least a half dozen more. Morgan held up a hand for silence, then he parted the brush and peered into the well-marked trail.

Four men were huddled behind a cluster of boulders, getting ready to charge the hiding place where big Charley Bowie had forted up. Morgan pointed at the four, and indicated targets for his three companions.

One of the outlaws was tall Joe Turner who had captured Dave Fuller at the big dam. The outlaw was crouching forward, and Charley Bowie's rifle had stopped talking. Just as Turner gave the word for the final charge, Wayne Morgan nodded and pressed trigger.

Joe Turner screamed and leaped into full view. Thorsen and the two guards triggered their Winchesters, and all four of the outlaws were down in the brush. Only one man tried to stagger to his feet. Olaf Thorsen grunted as he squeezed off a shot which ended that outlaw's earthly career.

Silence for a long moment, then came an inquiring call.

"Is that you, Morgan? Big Charley talkin' from behind an empty gun!"

"Charley!" Morgan shouted happily. "We thought yuh were done for. Come on out!"

"Come on in," the big Texan called back. "I got a pindlin' scratch in the off-leg, but that Brace Jordan won't need him a trail stake now!"

Morgan and his three companions left the brush screen and ran to Bowie's aid. Morgan shuddered as he passed the twisted form of handsome Brace Jordan who was staring up at the sky with wide, sightless eyes.

"Yuh hurt bad, Charley?" he asked Bowie, and the big Texan grinned.

"Nothin' the doctor can't cure," he answered carelessly. "I taken a slug through

the thigh, and while mebbe I can't fork a bronc, I can do guard duty with Olaf here at the bridge. Just tie off this scratch to stop the blood, then yuh better get on to Longhorn."

Morgan tore Bowie's shirt into strips and made a crude but effective bandage. The wound was clean, and Morgan poured some permanganate into the wound, from the bottle Thorsen brought from the shack. Bowie looked curiously at Morgan and asked a low question.

"Who did for Jordan?"

Morgan turned slowly and shook his head. He busied himself reloading his six-shooters.

"I thought I saw the Masked Rider up there through the brush, but I couldn't be shore," Bowie said. "If you didn't wing Jordan, the Masked Rider did!"

"Hold Sam Patch for the Law," Morgan said to Olaf Thorsen, as he pouched his six-shooter and stared at the dead outlaws in the brush. "The drive ought to get here by tomorrow night, and Bob Lee will tell yuh what to do. I'm gettin' on to Longhorn, and I don't believe there'll be any more trouble. You, Olaf"—he turned to the big Norwegian—"there's a charge of dynamite planted under the bridge. Yuh better get rid of it. I'll see yuh all later!"

CHAPTER XIV

The Key

LONGHORN had been Wayne Morgan's stopping place for three days. Sandra Blaine and Rosemary Lee had left the trail herd which was coming up the long twisting trail on time, and without trouble. Rosemary had brought a message to Morgan from her father, and the contents of that message had kept Morgan in town instead of riding back to help with the cattle drive.

The rails for the new spur line were pushing west from Longhorn, and east from Calaveras. Success seemed assured for the cattlemen of the valley, and with the cattle sold, the new rail line would be free of debt.

Creighton Blaine was listening attentively as Wayne Morgan talked earnestly in Blaine's office. Morgan took a deep breath, unconsciously flipped the holster on his right leg, and settled his Stetson firmly on his head.

"So we'll call on Jediah Thompson, Attorney-at-Law," he drawled, and the two men left Blaine's office.

Thompson's office was on a side street near the freight depot. His sign announced that Thompson also dealt in real estate.

Wayne Morgan turned the door-knob and walked into the lawyer's office with Blaine following closely. A stocky broad-shouldered man turned from the lawyer's littered desk with a frown on his beefy face.

"Good mornin', Burdock," Morgan said quietly. "And, you, Thompson. Yuh both know Creighton Blaine. We come to get the key."

Till Burdock glared at Morgan and blustered that he didn't know what the cowboy was talking about. Jediah Thompson seemed embarrassed, and then his sharp face became contorted with anger when Morgan pointed to a map which showed Deep River Canyon twisting from Longhorn to the Calaveras Valley. Morgan stepped forward and placed his finger on a shaded portion of the map.

"This is the key," Morgan said bluntly. "It's the only parcel of land through the gorge on which Blaine does not have a right-of-way. He had an option from Ned Randall, but Randall was killed by one of Brace Jordan's men in a hold-up."

"Are you a cowhand, or a lawyer?" Till Burdock asked with a sneer.

"Both," Morgan answered, with a grim smile. "I've been makin' some inquiries, and I found out that Burleigh Carter had a paper from Randall givin' Carter a ninety-day option to buy the land for five thousand dollars. The signature was forged, and it won't stand up in court!"

"Well, you gentlemen have business to discuss, so I'll be running along," Burdock said, and stretched to his feet.

"Just a moment, Burdock," Morgan told the stocky cattleman. "Some money is goin' to change hands legally, and you're in on the deal. Set down!"

"I got no deal with you," Burdock answered angrily. "And don't tell me what to do."

"Listen," Morgan whispered, and held up his left hand. "There's a crowd comin' this way, and they must be after somebody they don't like. Mebbe somebody who betrayed 'em."

Till Burdock turned his head to listen, and his little eyes showed a trace of fear as the murmur of angry voices became louder.

"What is this?" he demanded. "And who is that mob huntin' for?"

"They're some of the little cattlemen," Morgan explained. "They heard that one of the valley men was sellin' a piece of land to the Chicago Syndicate, and the sale would stop the spur line from joinin'."

"I'm gettin' out of here!" said Burdock.

Morgan flicked his hand and drew his gun.

"Yuh'll listen to me if yuh want to live, Burdock," he said in a low voice. "Right now I'm a lawyer—what you might call a gun-lawyer. Brace Jordan was killed several days ago—the same day I brought that money to Longhorn. Jordan was told I was bringin' the money, and you was seen talkin' to Jordan!"

"I won't stay here and listen to yore infernal lies!" Burdock shouted hoarsely. "The Masked Rider killed Brace Jordan, just as he killed Burleigh Carter!"

"That's right," Morgan agreed. "And the cattle will be in the loadin' pens here in Longhorn in a day or so. That tick-infested herd was turned back toward the gulf, and the new bridge was saved. All the railroad needs now to be a success is that parcel of land I mentioned. That piece of land is the key!"

"Which I have purchased for the Syndicate!" Jediah Thompson interrupted triumphantly.

"But the papers have not been signed," Morgan corrected. "Blaine and I interrupted that important transaction, and that crowd is gettin' closer, to take a hand!"

"I've got Ned Randall's option to buy that parcel of land," Thompson barked. "The price is twenty thousand dollars!"

"Nuh-uh," Morgan contradicted. "That option ain't legal, because Randall had mortgaged his land, and he couldn't sell without the permission of the mortgage holder. Am I right, Burdock?"

BURDOCK shrugged uneasily.

"So I own the mortgage," he blustered. "Anything wrong with a man gettin' his money back on a bad deal?"

"No," Morgan agreed. "Yuh loaned Randall three thousand dollars on them two sections, and yuh're a member of the Calaveras Cattlemen's Association. They won't like it when they find out who ruined 'em by sellin' out to the Chicago Syndicate. Creighton Blaine is prepared to give yuh five thousand dollars in full settlement of yore claims against Randall's estate."

"I'll have the law on yuh for this stick-up," Burdock threatened. "Put that gun away!"

"The gun is to protect yuh against yore neighbors," Morgan corrected. "They ain't shore who sold 'em out, but when they find out the feller that did will be needin' protection."

"Yuh've got no proof!" Burdock said.

Wayne Morgan smiled coldly. "Yuh was also makin' a deal with Thompson for him to sell out yore Box B Ranch in the valley," he accused. "They all know yuh're the only man who didn't want to build that ditch to keep that tick-infested herd out of the valley. When they hear yuh was dealin' with Carter, and tipped off Brace Jordan about the money I was carryin', they ain't goin' to like it, Burdock."

Creighton Blaine stepped forward and faced Till Burdock. For a moment the railroad builder stared at the rancher, unable to hide the contempt he felt for the traitor.

"I'm giving you a last chance, Burdock," Blaine said grimly. "Joe Dunstan and Bob Lee know about your treachery. The three of us will buy out your Box B holdings, and give you a chance to leave town with a whole skin. But first, you will sign over the mortgage on that key piece of land in the name of Ned Randall, and we will pay you five thousand cash. You can take the money and get out of town before your neighbors find out what you tried to do!"

"As your counsel, I advise you to accept, Burdock," Thompson said. "I will handle the details, and protect your interests!"

"And yore own!" Burdock burst out. "You talked me into this, and you was goin' to get a fat fee from the Syndicate, as well as bein' appointed their legal representative here in Longhorn!"

Burdock glanced through the door and saw a crowd of men milling around Blaine's office down the street. He wet his lips, gulped a time or two, and nodded.

"I'll accept, and I'll get out of town," he muttered. "Just change them papers, Thompson, and let me sign!"

"Here's the five thousand in cash for the key parcel," Blaine said quietly, and laid the paper money on the lawyer's desk.

The little lawyer counted the money, deducted ten per cent, and handed the balance to Till Burdock. Then he made a few changes in some legal papers which Burdock signed without reading.

"The train for Austin leaves in ten minutes," Morgan told Burdock quietly. "There's been enough killin' in this part of Texas, and that crowd won't find out about yuh if yuh hurry."

Burdock sighed with relief as he pocketed his money and hurriedly left the office. Jediah Thompson turned to Morgan.

"You can put up your gun, Lawyer," Thompson said meekly. "I've done you a good turn this morning. Can I depend on your discretion as to my part in this affair?"

"Business is business," Creighton Blaine answered for Morgan. "We will buy out Burdock's Box B after his neighbors have made a fair appraisal of the value. Good morning, Thompson!"

* * * * *

Fat steers bellowed in the holding pens awaiting their turn to be loaded on the cars for the Eastern markets. Old Bob Lee was handling the bills of lading, and the Calaveras Valley cowboys were having a well-deserved holiday in town.

The section-hands were completing the laying of the steel rails across the keypiece of land which had meant the success or failure of the spur railroad. A small work engine was hauling ties and steel down into the gorge, and Wayne Morgan was talking to Creighton Blaine at the edge of town.

"How about staying on here and ramrodding our new ranch?" Blaine suggested to Morgan. "Dunstan, Lee and myself have talked it over, and you can write your own ticket."

BOB LEE rode up in time to hear Morgan's answer, and the old cattleman showed his disappointment.

"I've got the itchin' heel, Mr. Blaine," Morgan said slowly, and his blue eyes held the far-away look of distant places. "I want to see the other side of the hill."

"It's time yuh was settlin' down, Morgan," old Bob Lee added his persuasion. "Get yoreself a good wife, and yuh'll soon be one of us down here."

Morgan smiled ruefully. "I've heard the glad tidin's," he said to Lee. "Rosemary is goin' to marry Dan Dunstan, and Sandra is gettin' hitched to young Dave Fuller. Either one of them boys will make yuh a good manager for the new ranch, and they've got all the luck."

"Did I hear some one mention my name?" a girl's voice asked, and Sandra Blaine rode up with Dave Fuller. "Howdy, Wayne," she called cordially, and Morgan sighed when Rosemary Lee and Dan Dunstan came racing up to join them.

"Congratulations to all four of yuh," Morgan said as he faced the happy couples. "Sorry I can't stay for the double weddin', but I get restless when my work is finished."

"But yuh've got to stay long enough for us to square up," Bob Lee insisted. "There are rewards on them outlaws, not to mention Brace Jordan."

Wayne Morgan's face grew sober. "I'm no bounty hunter," he said gruffly. "When them rewards are paid, turn the money over to the fund for the widows of peace officers who were killed while dischargin' their duty!"

Creighton Blaine offered his hand.

"We owe you more than we can ever pay, Morgan," he said sincerely. "You saved our water supply, and you showed us how to hold back that tick-infested herd. Then you made it possible for us to bring the shipping herd through safely, not mentioning the fact that you saved the new bridge."

"That isn't all," Bob Lee added his bit. "We'd still have lost our railroad if yuh hadn't out-foxed Till Burdock on that key piece of land."

Wayne Morgan flushed with embarrassment. "Yuh are all forgettin' the Masked Rider," he reminded, to change the subject from himself.

"Say, that's right," Creighton Blaine spoke up eagerly. "The Masked Rider really saved the fifty thousand dollars which made it possible for us to pay the help, and to buy that piece of land. I wonder what became of him and his Indian companion?"

"From what I hear, the Masked Rider never stays around long after his work is done," Morgan said slowly.

Creighton Blaine pointed to the twin rails of steel winding down into the Canyon. Within a month the railroad would be in operation, and the valley cattlemen would be assured of an enduring prosperity.

"We owe a lot to two men," the railroad builder said, in a hushed voice. "It was Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider who made the Longhorn Rails possible. Those two don't even know each other, but they make a hard team to beat!"

Next Issue's Wayne Morgan Novel: HOUNDS OF PERDITION, by Gunnison Steele

Omar lashed him like a balky mule until Asher's beautiful shirt came apart

OMAR THE HARNESS-MAKER

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Meek little Mr. Simpkins proves he isn't a timid soul at all when he comes up against an ornery thieving coyote!

THE day when his brother's son came to visit him was something special for Omar Simpkins. The sun shone with a special brilliance, and the birds sang special songs. Old Omar had put on a clean shirt for the occasion, and had shaved, although it was only Wednesday. Even the sewing machine in his harness shop sang instead of squeaked as he stiched a new strap on a broken crupper.

Young Asher Simpkins got off the evening stage, and he looked just as old Omar had expected he would, except that he was a little fatter and softer than Omar had visualized him to be. And dressed a little more flashy. But after all, a famous rider who went to rodeos all over the United States was a showman in a way, and had to dress the part.

With professional eye, Omar looked first

at his nephew's hand-sewn boots. They were fancy all right, but the leather was not what should be in a really good boot. Omar felt a little ashamed at being so critical. Still, the boy was young yet, and probably didn't know quality in leather like a man who had worked in it all his life, as Omar had.

"Well, Uncle Omar"—the young man beamed as he came into the littered little harness shop and dropped a big canvas war-bag—"it's shore good to see yuh."

Omar was small and stooped, and wore strong steel-rimmed glasses, but he made up for his own insignificance by cultivating a luxurious pair of long-horn mustaches.

Omar had prepared a little welcome speech for his only living relative, but somehow his timidity got the upper hand. He was awed by the purple silk shirt, the dove-colored Stetson and the fawn-colored whip-cord riding breeches.

It wasn't that Omar wanted to be silent, it was just that he was too timid to express himself. He had lived in the back of his shop in Adobe Wells for twenty years, and every man who owned a work animal in the county had done business with him at one time or another, but nobody would have said they knew him.

Adobe Wells had just put him down as a good leather worker, but a simple little creature who hadn't sense enough to do anything but mend a saddle or a pair of boots. Nobody could remember his having ever said a word except to ask for what he wanted to buy, or to answer questions relative to the job in hand.

OMAR was conscious of the fact that Adobe Wells took him for a simple fool, and this added to his tragedy. For Omar Simpkins was a tragic figure, because he had his dreams and his longings, just like every other human. It was not his fault that he was not a man-about-town, a ranch owner, a man married to a beautiful wife, a daring sheriff with a hair-trigger gun—yes, even a dashing outlaw.

But Omar was a dreamer, and his dreams were so full of grandeur that he dared not talk about them, even as he dared not do nor talk about anything except his work. For he was cursed with an unusual timidity.

Though he might not have been able to explain it, it was this timidity of his own which added greatly to the welcome with which he greeted his young nephew. The Nobody could bask in the reflected glory of a blood relative who was a Somebody, a rodeo performer who traveled all over the country riding horses which couldn't be ridden, thrilling thousands with his daring.

His speech of welcome drowned in his own wonderment that he had been selected by his nephew for a visit. He could only stammer:

"I'm glad to have yuh. The place ain't much, but I've got a couple of cots fixed up in the room back of the shop. Bought yuh a new one, with white sheets and everything."

"Now that's mighty white of yuh, Uncle Omar. I know accommodations ain't much in a little cross-roads like this, but I'll make out. Where's the bathroom?"

Uncle Omar turned red around the neck. "Well, I usually wash in a tub I got to wash my clothes. I'll draw yuh some water."

"Oh, let it go," young Asher said. "Probably I can get a bath at the hotel."

"We live kind of simple here," Uncle Omar explained apologetically. "I reckon it ain't like the cities yuh been goin' to. Yuh been to the Cheyenne Roundup, and the Calgary Stampede and the Fiesta de los Vaqueros—"

"Yes, I've made 'em all," Asher answered off-handedly.

"That's wonderful!" Omar said. "Le's go down to the hotel. I want yuh to meet some friends of mine. Important people around here."

"I'd shore be glad to," Asher answered.

Omar beamed as he closed up his shop. This was indeed a great hour, the hour when he would show Adobe Wells that he amounted to something. Well—at least his family did.

Omar stopped and thought a moment. "These people will probably be in the saloon," he said. "They drink." He studied his nephew's face.

Asher smiled tolerantly. "Oh, I'm a man of the world," he said. "I take a drink."

"And they gamble," Omar added significantly. "They play cards."

"Don't worry," Asher said with amusement. "I can hold my own with anybody in a town of this size." He added as an afterthought, "Oh, by the way, would yuh mind introducin' me to somebody who can cash a check for me? I'm goin' to have to draw on my bank."

Omar was pleased at the opportunity to do his nephew a favor.

"How much is it for? I can probable cash it."

"Quite a little bit: I'll need a hundred dollars or so."

"Oh, I can take care of that," Omar said, and beamed.

The visitor wrote him a check on a bank in Denver and handed it to Omar. Omar peered at it through his glasses, saw it was for two hundred dollars, then motioned mysteriously for Asher to follow him. They went back into the shop, and Omar led him to something which Asher hadn't noticed before.

It was a stuffed Shetland pony, a little bay and white paint animal not over four feet high, mounted on a low platform with castors on it, so it could be pulled out onto the sidewalk as an advertisement. The animal wore a hand-tooled saddle and bridle, the product of Omar's own craftsmanship.

Omar went to the stuffed horse's head, stuck a finger up one nostril and pushed. Then he threw back the mane over the front of the horse's neck, and Asher saw a small oblong opening in the skin of the neck.

"My secret vault," Omar explained proudly. "Nobody knows about it but me."

He reached into the neck of the stuffed horse and brought out a leather wallet and opened it. There was a stack of currency in it three inches thick.

"Clever," Asher commented.

"Yes," Omar admitted. "But the bank went broke here about ten years ago, and I lost all my savin's. It won't happen again."

HE COUNTED out the money, placed the check in the wallet, and closed up his secret vault. They walked on down to the hotel, Omar not trying to conceal the satisfaction he felt at walking down the street with such an outstanding person as his nephew, one at whom people stopped to stare.

They walked into Beveren's Hotel and Bar, and for the first time since he had lived in Adobe Wells, Omar Simpkins did not stop in the lobby, but led his guest on into the saloon.

There were only a few people in the bar, but Omar felt considerable triumph as he saw all their heads turned toward them. Omar's hands were trembling with the excitement of the adventure, but the triumph was well worth it. They went up to the bar.

Omar had difficulty ordering, because of the strangeness of it all, which made him even more timid. But he could not back out now. When the bartender came, he said:

"Give me a glass of wine. And see what the other gentlemen want. I am celebratin' the visit of my nephew, one of the country's great rodeo stars."

They all ordered, and they lined up and were individually introduced to the great young rodeo star who had ridden at Cheyenne and Calgary and all the big shows.

With the glass of red wine in his trembling hand, the old poetry lover hidden behind the face of a harness maker remembered the verse he had memorized from the book he had bought many years ago because it was written by a man with the same name as his own. He was happier than he had ever been in his life. And now, too, he saw the wisdom of poetry. For hadn't Omar, the old tent-maker, expressed the very feelings he now had?

Ah, my beloved, fill the cup that clears today of past regrets and future fears.
Tomorrow? Why, tomorrow I myself may be with yesterday's seven thousand years.

In his glory, Omar had taken his first drink of wine, a thing he had dreamed of doing ever since he had known that the old Persian tent-maker had sung its praises. And he had somehow picked out an appropriate selection from his favorite and, in fact, only poet.

For Omar, the saddle-maker, like his old namesake, did not know what the morrow had in store for him.

His neighbors were properly impressed with young Asher Simpkins. Plunkett, the livery stable keeper, brought a round of drinks, and then Marrs, the horse-trader, brought a round, and then Wingate, the cattle buyer, bought a round.

Omar nursed his sweet red wine carefully, but he was faced with living up to his new importance, and he took drink for drink with them.

And now that Omar was a Somebody, they invited him and Asher to join them in the poker game they had in mind. Asher accepted, but Omar had to renege.

"I don't feel like playin' tonight," he lied.

He really wanted to play, but he was too timid to admit that he did not know how. It would not do now to let them see his shortcomings.

He watched them play for a few minutes, but he did not know the first thing about cards, and he did not feel any too well anyway. His head was a little light.

He began to have an unsteady feeling after somebody bought another round of drinks.

"I believe I'll run on home," he said to his nephew.

"Shore," the young man answered. "I'll be along in a little while."

Asher came to the little room back of the harness shop several hours later. Omar hadn't been able to sleep on account of the bed rocking like a boat. Clad only in his long underwear, he raised up on his elbow.

"How did yuh make out playin' cards, Asher?" he inquired.

"I guess I won a few dollars," his nephew admitted. "I didn't keep count."

"Um," Omar said thoughtfully. "I don't know about these things, but I've heard it said that them three men yuh was playin' with think it's a great joke when they can cheat each other. They're respectable business men, and I don't suppose they'd cheat a

visitor that came to town. I just thought I would tell yuh."

"Don't worry about me," Asher said scornfully. "I can take care of myself with anybody in a town of this size. I could show 'em a thing or two if I wanted to."

This eased Omar's mind and he went on to sleep.

THE next evening Asher went out by himself to the bar, and played till midnight. Omar didn't hear him when he came in.

"Where's a long distance phone?" Asher asked the following morning.

"Up at Miss Effie Markhan's house. She operates the telephone system here."

Asher went out, and again Omar didn't see him until the following morning. He had been asleep again when his nephew returned. He gave the young man a small package which had come for him in the mail, and again Asher went out. Omar was glad he had found such good friends among Adobe Wells' business men. It reflected credit on Omar.

After he had closed his shop for the evening, Omar had some book work to do. He had to order some leather, and to pay some bills the following morning. He made out his order from the wholesale catalogue, figured out how much money it would cost, and what else he owed, and wrote it down on a slip of paper in his usual methodical manner. Then he went out into the shop.

He opened the secret compartment in the neck of the stuffed Shetland pony and groped around for the wallet containing his life's savings.

The wallet was gone!

He could not believe it. He must have put it somewhere else! Feeling cold inside, he got a match and lit a lamp. He looked along his work-benches, and in his room, and the wallet was not there.

He carried the lamp back to the house, and then he saw his wallet. It lay on the floor back of the horse.

He picked the wallet up quickly and looked in it. The wallet was empty!

As empty as Omar felt inside as he put the lamp down on his dresser and fell limp into a chair. His face had broken out in perspiration, and he removed his glasses and wiped his face with his sleeve.

He sat there for half an hour, suffering misery and trying to think of some explanation other than the obvious one. But he could find none.

Asher! He had accepted the young man as though he were his own. Asher was the only one who knew of the hiding place, the only person who knew that there was a lot of money in that stuffed horse. Omar's life's savings—over twenty-four hundred dollars.

His world had crashed down around his ears. He had worked hard and had gone without things so that eventually he could make a dream come true, the dream of a little ranch and his own little herd. He had been a lonesome man, and he had taken his kin to his heart, and his kin had bitten him as though he had hugged a rattlesnake.

Dead dreams, poisoned by a young thief in a purple shirt. Omar knew he was too old ever to save that much money again. He knew full well that this was the end for him. How could a mild little man like he was face a big strapping thief like this Asher? He trembled at the thought of it. He trembled still more at the idea of reporting the theft to the sheriff, and creating a public scene.

He was looking dazedly at the half-filled whisky bottle which Asher had left on the table the night before. He picked it up and mechanically turned it up to his lips. When he took it down it was emptier by half a cupful.

As the liquor warmed his stomach, he wiped his mouth. His mind seemed to be clearer, and he could see it all now. Asher had not been winning, as he had hinted, but had been losing to that bunch of crooks down at the saloon. Asher didn't have much money, or he wouldn't have had to cash a check the minute he got in town. Omar had an idea that the check wouldn't have been any good if he had sent it to the bank for collection.

He was getting mad now, and he took another drink. He was a worm, he admitted. Even the people of the town hadn't respected him. He had been too timid, too afraid to stick up for his rights. He had always charged too little for his work, just because he was afraid people would argue with him about his prices.

The liquor warmed his stomach still more, and the fumes were clearing the cobwebs away from his mind so that he could see himself for the first time in his life—and he didn't like the picture he saw.

He knew he had to do something about it, something as dramatic as the dreams he had always had, and had kept concealed and futile.

WHEN he got to his feet, a new, angry light was in his eyes. He looked at the clock on the table, saw that the stage would be leaving in ten minutes. It was certain that Asher would try to get away on that stage.

Omar drained the liquor bottle, drew himself erect and walked stiffly up to his shop. He selected a heavy plaited leather

quirt he had made with his own hands, and looped it on his wrist. Then he walked out the front door, his gray hair ruffling in the breeze, his eyes behind the iron-rimmed glasses wide and fixed, and his gait stiff and erect—and a little wabbly.

He walked into the hotel, not seeing the people who looked at him in surprise, and on through to the barroom.

"My nephew," he asked the bartender. "Where is he?"

The bartender twisted his mouth to hide a smirk.

"I don't know, but yuh'd better find him before Plunkett and Wingate and Marrs finds him. They're goin' to beat him to a pulp."

"Why?"

The bartender picked up a deck of cards off the backbar.

"This is what he run in on 'em a few minutes ago. They took over two thousand dollars off'n that fourflusher in the last four days. Then today he runs in this deck and takes three thousand off'n them cuttin' high card before they get wise that he's usin' a deck with slick aces. They got wise when he went outside a minute—but he didn't come back. They're lookin' for him now. Yuh better beat 'em to it, if yuh want anything left of that phony."

Omar didn't understand all he heard about how it happened, but he did understand that Asher had lost the money he had stolen from him, and had got it back with a crooked deck of cards and then had disappeared.

"Give me a drink," he said with dignity.

"Sweet wine?"

"No. Whisky—a big one."

Omar wiped his mouth and left the place, headed down toward the stage office, talking to himself.

"Well," he said, "it's a long lane that don't turn. I should have had more nerve before. A drink of whisky gives yuh nerve. Like the feller said, that stuff would make a tomcat dog in a bull spit's eye—make a tomdog spit in a bullcat's—no make a bulltom spit in a dogcat's . . . aw shucks anyway, I guess the worm's turned. The worm's goin' to—"

He saw through the reeling street that he was at the stage station, and that Asher was rushing out of the office to get aboard the stage.

Omar broke into a swift trot and reached the door of the stage-coach just ahead of him.

Asher bumped into him, in his haste, before he saw him.

"I want my money, Asher," Omar said slowly and distinctly.

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about," the confused Asher answered.

"Yes yuh do, yuh young whelp. Give it to me right now!"

"Look, Uncle Omar, I'm in a hurry."

"Give me that money!"

"I ain't got it!"

"Yuh stole my money," Omar's voice crackled, "and lost it gamblin'."

"I'll mail yuh a check for it. I just borrowed it. Please!"

"Shell out that money," Omar said threateningly. "I'm tellin' yuh for the last time."

"But I haven't got it!"

The little old harness-maker suddenly grabbed his big nephew by the collar of his purple silk shirt and jerked him out of the line of passengers. He lashed at him with the quirt, and Asher yelled. Omar whipped him as he would a balky mule, and every time Asher tried to dodge away, Old Omar brought him back with a lash around the neck.

The beautiful shirt came apart under the thong of the whip, and floated around the red welts on the white skin of Asher's back, like purple flags.

People were running up from both ends of the street.

"All right, all right!" Asher cried. "Quit hittin' me with that quirt! I'll give it to yuh."

"Shell it out, yuh dirty thief," Omar gritted.

He held back the whip while Asher dug rolls of bills out of his pockets and poured them into the little harness-maker's hands. Omar stuffed them hurriedly into his own pockets.

When Omar had it all, Asher said:

"Now let me go. I'm in a hurry!"

OMAR looked around and saw Plunkett, Wingate and Marrs pushing through the crowd, their angry eyes on the young fellow who was retreating into the stage.

"There he is!" Marrs yelled. "Stop that thief before he gets away!"

The three men tried to push Omar aside and go in after Asher.

"Just hold on," Omar said, gripping his whip menacingly. "You listen to me. Yuh crooked that boy out of money and yuh ain't got any right to yell when he got it back the same way. Not that I approve of any of yuh doin' it."

"Get out of the way, Omar. That tramp took three thousand dollars away from us before we found out he was usin' a slick deck! We're gettin' that money back."

"Yuh're not gettin' it back!" Omar shouted. "That money he took back from yuh was my money in the first place. I've got it now." He squared his shoulders.

"Try and take it away from me! The first man that touches me I'll cut his ears off with this quirt and throw them to the dogs. Well?"

The coach driver whipped up his horses and the coach rolled away, and still the three crooked gamblers stood looking in amazement at the old harness-maker. Back of them was a circle of the most surprised faces Adobe Wells ever witnessed.

"Well?" Omar repeated his challenge.

Marrs shrugged. "Aw, let it go. It was his money in the first place." Then he turned, and the other two followed him.

"Wait a minute, Marrs," Omar said. "Yuh've got a paint hoss I'm interested in. Drop by my place tomorrow. I might be in the market for him. I'm buyin' a little place and I'll want to stock it. Wingate, if yuh've got any Herefords I'll be glad to look 'em over."

Then Omar pushed his way through the crowd, stopped off at the saloon and bought a whole bottle of wine, and went home. He poured a glass of it, held it up before the cracked mirror of his dresser, and admired the man-of-the-world picture he saw—although the picture was a little blurred.

"Well," he said, "it's a long worm that has no turnin'. Here's mud in yore eye."

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At the explosions, the burros stampeded, bucking and kicking off the packs

DEMONS OF DISASTER

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Goldfield sluice-box robbers threaten to annex a Chinese miners' dust—but they face a roaring Oriental surprise!

SQUATTING on his heels beside the fire in front of the small log cabin, old Lee Chung ate gobs of rice and chunks of boiled pork with his chopsticks. His cousin, Wong Chin, a younger Oriental, sat on the opposite side of the fire and ate also.

The brilliant sunset had died in the western sky, and dusk was descending into the rocky canyon through which the tumbling white-water creek rushed to empty into the Yuba River. The firelight played over the faces of the two men as they devoured their evening meal.

Wong Chin was watching old Lee Chung's countenance carefully, hoping to read therein some inkling of what Lee Chung was thinking, what he intended doing about the situation that confronted them, and hoping it would not be something he would dislike.

For there was an important problem to be

solved. The demons of disaster had been visiting this modest gold-seekers' camp on the bank of the creek again. So it followed that the gods were displeased about something, and Lee and Wong should do whatever would appease them and gain their favor.

What did it profit them to work from daylight until dusk each day and wash out gold-dust and nuggets if evil men came and robbed their sluice boxes and took the rewards of their toil? And once the masked visitors had even located the poke which Lee Chung believed he had hidden so cunningly, and had taken that.

Wong Chin wished half a hundred times a day that he had remained in the thriving city of San Francisco instead of coming out here to this lonesome rocky canyon on the Yuba river to help his elderly kinsman on the claim.

A Chinese could make good money in San Francisco washing shirts for miners and gamblers, and many of their own kind lived there. They could play fantan and dominoes together, and with the frantic gold-rushers coming to the diggings on every ship there was always amusing activity.

Lee Chung again silently filled his bowl with rice and boiled pork from the big pot over the cooking fire, grasped his chopsticks, and looked across at Wong Chin.

"There must be a swift end to it!" he declared. "We have suffered more than our proper share at the hands of the thieves. The gods must be appeased so they will grant us a season of good fortune."

Wong Chin began jabbering in his native tongue, but his elderly cousin halted him with a gesture.

"You will spleak Melican," Lee ordered. "Must learn language well." Then he dropped into his native tongue himself. "I have considered our problem. The demons of disaster are preying upon us. They must be driven away, so we may profit in peace from our hard toil."

Wong Chin nodded his head vigorously in agreement.

"A low thief stole our poke," Lee continued. "Three times our sluice boxes have been robbed of gold. One time a masked man held a flaming stick to my naked toes to make me tell where our dust and nuggets were hidden. It is too much!"

WONG nodded in agreement again, so vigorously this time that his queue, which had been wrapped around his head, became undone and slapped him in his face.

"A certain amount of trouble and adversity is good for a man, but we have had too much," Lee announced. "So, I have made a decision. At dawn tomorrow you will start for Saclamento."

Wong Chin's slant eyes opened a bit wider than usual at that and he sat erect, but otherwise did not reveal he had been startled. So he was to journey to Sacramento! Next to San Francisco, he liked Sacramento best. He had several cousins there, younger than Lee Chung.

"You will go to the joss house and see the priest," Lee instructed. "You will burn many punk sticks in front of the joss. You will get plenty of sacred firecrackers which have been blessed by priest, and you will return here swiftly. We will shoot off sacred firecrackers and frighten away the demons of disaster."

Wong Chin thought that would be an excellent idea, especially since it would give him a trip to Sacramento. It was the proper thing to do under the circumstances.

He would go to Sacramento and see the head priest at the joss house, burn punk sticks before the sacred joss, make a suitable donation, get the blessed firecrackers and return at top speed.

Then he and his elderly cousin would shoot the loud firecrackers a string at a time and make a terrific din. The demons of disaster would be frightened and driven out of the canyon, out of the Yuba River district, and bother them no more.

Now that everything was planned, Wong Chin gave his attention to the meal. He filled his bowl from the pot again and ate ravenously, his mind on the forthcoming journey.

A loud "hee-haw" made him jerk and almost drop chopsticks and bowl.

"It is the devil animal belonging to the men up the gulch," Lee said. "You encourage him, my cousin. His evil master, known to men as Chuck Gardon, is the chief of the sluice robbers, I believe."

A burro ambled into the circle of firelight and stood waiting with his head extended. He was a shaggy beast, generally docile, but known to have a fit of energy at times, especially when frightened. He made a habit of coming down the canyon and stopping at the cabin, for Wong had made the mistake once of giving him sugar. "It is good to be kind to animals," Wong said.

He got up and hurried into the cabin, and returned with a handful of sugar. The burro licked the sugar from his hand, voiced his thanks, and walked around the fire to return up the canyon.

"It is a waste," Lee complained. "Feeding good sugar to a donkey. You must learn thrift, my cousin. Go now, and stretch on your pallet, for you must rest and be up before dawn to start your journey. I'll have a package of cold food ready for you."

It was just at dawn when Wong Chin bobbed his head in farewell to Lee Chung and left the cabin to hurry down the canyon beside the tumbling stream. Hidden on his person was a tiny poke containing a couple of pinches of gold dust for his traveling expenses.

He carried the package of cold food Lee had prepared. And he wore his oldest and most comfortable sandals, which gave with every movement of his feet and helped him cling safely to the surfaces of slippery rocks.

Where the tumbling creek emerged from the canyon and emptied into the Yuba River, Wong came upon a comfortable cabin. A man was working at the edge of the stream, and a girl stood in the cabin doorway.

Eli Madison, a kind middle-aged man, was the owner of this claim. The Chinese in the district liked him because he was honest and fair in his dealings. His wife had died of a fever in Sacramento the year before, and he had brought his daughter Elsie, only twenty, to the claim with him.

Wong Chin bobbed his head in greeting, and Madison stopped shoveling gravel to talk.

"Making a trip to Marysville?" Madison asked.

"Me glo all way to Saclamento," Wong explained, proudly. "Glet back soon as can."

"I'll walk up the creek and visit Lee while yuh've gone," Madison promised. "I want to tell him that I've sent word to Marysville to the Vigilantes. We've had more'n enough of sluice box robbers around here. I shot at a couple the other night, but missed 'em."

Wong bobbed his head to show that he understood, and drew in his breath sharply to indicate that he was sorry Madison had missed.

"The Vigilantes have a pretty good idea about who's doin' the sluice box thievin' around here," Madison continued. "Chuck Gardon and the two men who live with him up the gulch above yore claim. They don't do much work on their property, but they always seem to have plenty of dust to spend."

Wong bobbed his head in agreement. He and Lee Chung had suspected Gardon and his friends.

ELSIE MADISON called to him from the doorway, and he bowed to her and looked at Madison questioningly.

"She's made some cookies," Madison told him, laughing. "Wants to try 'em out on yuh. Go get some."

Wong hurried to the cabin. Elsie Madison handed him a small paper bag filled with cookies, and he muttered his thanks and bowed again and hurried away. All this ceremony was delaying him, he thought. But the cookies were welcome.

He hurried on down the creek and turned into the trail which ran along the bank of the Yuba to Marysville. He dog-trotted at times where the trail was smooth, and covered the miles easily and without much fatigue. At times, he slowed down and munched cookies.

It was dusk when he reached Marysville, and lights were burning in the shacks and business establishments. Wong sought out one of his own kind he knew, had a meal, and arranged for a pallet upon which to sleep. Then he went down to the principal street.

Nobody gave him special attention, for pigtailed Chinese were not strangers in the district. He shuffled along, keeping his eyes and ears open. He heard bearded miners talking about the sluice box robberies, and of the dreaded Vigilantes, and once he came to where men were reading a freshly painted sign which had been nailed to the side of a store building.

Wong listened as a man read it aloud:

NOTICE!

We have good idea regarding the identities of the sluice box robbers in this district. One more theft, and the guilty men will receive what they deserve. If they are wise, they will leave these diggings immediately.

The Committee.

"Well, it's about time the Vigilantes got after 'em!" a miner standing near Wong said. "If them thieves ain't stopped now, no sluice box along the Yuba will be safe. String 'em up, I say!"

Wong thought that was a good idea. He remembered how Lee Chung's feet had been blistered by a flaming stick. And he knew that all men feared the Vigilantes. Perhaps

this warning would stop the thieves, he thought.

He slept at his friend's house and at dawn hastened on, making his way as rapidly as as possible toward Sacramento. When he reached his destination, he located some of his cousins and told them of his errand. He rested for a time, ate, then went to the joss house.

Following Lee Chung's orders carefully, Wong burned many punk sticks as he kowtowed humbly before the joss. He gave the head priest a pinch of gold dust and told him of his desire.

"Evil men should be undone," the priest declared, after Wong had finished his recital. "It is a terrible crime to steal. I shall bless many strings of firecrackers, and you shall carry them back and explode them and frighten away the demons of disaster. Then peace will come to your mining claim, and you can enjoy the fruits of your toil."

Fatigued from his journey, Wong spent two days and nights with his cousins in Sacramento, marveling at the manner in which the town was growing, and eating much rice and pork. He was a guest, and did not have to pay for it.

Then he began his homeward trip, the firecrackers safe in a bundle wrapped carefully in waterproof silk, which he hung around his neck and carried on his back. He was eager to get home. Fired in the narrow rocky canyon, he knew, the firecrackers would make a loud noise and frighten the demons of disaster so they would never bother around the canyon again.

In time, he came once more to Marysville, and decided to rest there during the afternoon and night. He visited his friends again, and found them excited.

"Great news came to us yesterday," they told Wong. "There has been a great strike of gold on the Yuba River, just above where your creek empties into the larger stream. The man Madison has found many rich pockets and will be a person of wealth. And the report said also that your cousin and ours, Lee Chung, washed gravel in a new place on your own claim and is now a man of much wealth also."

"Lee Chung and I share alike," Wong told them, trying to keep an expression of happiness out of his face. It was not proper to flaunt his good fortune in the faces of those less fortunate.

"We are your cousins," one of them reminded him. "You must come to Marysville again soon, and perhaps bring us gifts to show that you are truly thankful for the good fortune the gods have given you."

Wong finally managed to get away from them, and hurried down to the crowded street to watch and listen. Men were outfitting feverishly to go to the scene of the new strike. Claims were being staked far up the Yuba, they were saying.

"There's a bunch of Chinese in the little canyon," Wong heard one man say. "We can stake claims above 'em. We won't bother 'em any. It's bad luck to bother a Chinese."

WONG shuffled on, watching and listening, and trying to gather information. So he came, presently, to the rear of a large building which held the town's biggest saloon and gambling hall. The windows were open, and the roar of the rollicking crowd rolled out.

Wong stepped up close to one of the windows to peer in at the scene. He heard two men talking only a few feet away, as they sat across a table from each other, a bottle and glasses before them.

Wong knew one of them by sight. He was "Chuck" Gardon, who had a claim above Lee's and was suspected of being the leader of the sluice box robbers. The second man was thick in body and heavily bearded, and Wong decided he had mean eyes.

"You don't own the country, Gardon," this man was saying.

"I ain't claimin' I do," Chuck Gardon replied. "I'm sayin' that I was playin' the Yuba River diggin's first. Why can't yuh stay over on the American River and work there?"

"Because the pickin's are gettin' better over on the Yuba," the other man replied. "And it got too hot for us over on the American."

"It's goin' to get hot here, too, Knowles," Chuck Gardon replied. "The cussed Vigilantes are startin' to get busy and fuss around, and yuh know what that'll mean. I'm fixin' to make one more big haul and go down to Frisco. This new strike—there ought to be some fat pokes to pick up if a man acts quick."

"I've got the same idea, Gardon."

"Yeah? Well, I'm warnin' yuh, Knowles, to keep away from the Yuba district, 'specially where I've been workin' with my two men. That man Madison belongs to me. I happen

to know that he's the feller who sent for the Vigilantes. I want his gold and his hide, both. And that pair of Chinese in the canyon—they're my meat, too."

"Not unless yuh can get to 'em before I do," the other man told him.

Wong heard somebody approaching, so had to move on swiftly and silently to avoid being caught listening at the window, and possibly getting a stiff cuff on the side of his head.

He understood that Chuck Gardon was preparing to steal again, and that the other man was of the same sort. Lee Chung and Madison would be at the mercy of them both, unless Wong hurried with the sacred firecrackers and drove the demons of disaster away.

He entered a shop and bought a few cheap presents with a tiny pinch of gold dust and took them to his friends. Later, he stretched himself on a pallet to rest, but did not sleep.

When all his friends were asleep, Wong slipped out of the shack, put on his sandals, fixed his pack, and was ready to start for home. As he neared the street, he heard a tumult. Men were shouting and running toward the big saloon and gambling hall.

"Chuck Gardon and Bart Knowles are fightin'!" he heard somebody yell.

Wong got in the fringe of the crowd to watch. Gardon and Knowles were in the street, slugging it out. The crowd was cheering them on. They seemed about evenly matched, until Gardon picked up a bottle somebody had thrown out of the saloon, and crashed it down on Knowles' head.

Knowles collapsed, and men rushed in to end the battle. Gardon and his two men got through the crowd and started up the street. Unobserved, Wong followed them and saw them enter a shack.

He felt he had an interest in this and that it would not be wrong to play eavesdropper, especially since these men were evil. He got on the dark side of the shack and listened beneath a window.

One of the men was bathing Gardon's cut and bruised face, and the other was opening a box of salve. Gardon was raging.

"I'll get Knowles if we ever meet again!" he threatened. "This country ain't big enough to hold us both! But first we'll make our haul. We'll slip out of town before daylight. You boys get everything ready. We'll beat Knowles to it. We'll travel fast and hit hard, then go over the hills and make for Frisco. The game's played out here."

"If Knowles is able to travel in the mornin', he'll be startin' up there with his men," one of Gardon's companions said. "He's got three men, I happen to know."

"We'll beat him to it, I said. Neither of us can make a haul till tomorrer night. We'll make our plans while we're gettin' to the canyon."

Wong understood all that. And he was eager to learn the plans so he could warn Lee Chung and Eli Madison. He decided he would wait and trail the trio when they left the town.

He went ahead and waited outside the town, hiding behind some brush. Before daylight, Gardon and his two men appeared, walking at a steady pace. They passed Wong, who trailed at a distance, keeping to the shadows. His sandals made no sound when he walked, and besides the wind was blowing toward him.

AT A SPOT where the trail was almost obscured by shadows, Wong got closer, for the wind was carrying their talk to him. Gardon led the way off the trail and up a ravine.

"We'll cut across so's nobody'll see us," Wong heard him say. "We'll rest in the cabin a few hours, and get everything ready. The dust and nuggets we've taken and got hid—we'd better not carry it on us. We'll pack the burro with our stuff, and put the dust and nuggets inside a flour sack. It'll look like we're just quittin' the diggin's."

"What about this last haul?" one of the men asked.

"Accordin' to what we heard, them Chinese and Madison have struck it rich. Ought to have fat pokes ready for us. We'll go down the canyon and hit the Chinese first, then go on and clean up Madison. I want to handle him! If he's got gold hid, we'll shore make him show us where it is. We'll grab that girl of his and threaten to hurt her if he don't. That'll make him talk."

Wong shivered at that. He didn't want these men to hurt Elsie Madison, who was always kind to him and old Lee, and who baked cookies. He didn't want them even to affront her. He decided he would listen and hear all he could of their plans.

"If Knowles tries to get ahead of us, we must beat him to it," Gardon said. "It'd be rich if we got the dust and nuggets and Knowles got blamed for it and him and his

men got strung up. Serve 'em right!"

"How about the Vigilantes?" one of the men asked.

"That's troublin' me some," Chuck Gardon admitted. "We've got to be mighty careful. If they catch us at it, they'll either fill us full of lead or make us stretch rope. I ain't hankerin' for either."

"Yuh reckon the Vigilantes are there already, Chuck?" the other man asked.

"Mebbe. I'll bet they've been slippin' up the Yuba a few at a time since they posted that sign in Marysville. It's my idea they'll gather there and be in ambush. We've got to smell 'em out."

They were not traveling so fast, off the trail, and since they had left Marysville a little before daylight, Wong knew it would be dusk when they reached the canyon. Now that daylight had come, he was compelled to be careful. If the men ahead saw and recognized him, and thought he was spying on them, they might resort to any kind of violence.

And Wong was compelled now to follow them, for he was utterly lost. Since leaving the regular trail, they had been going through ravines and up slopes. Chuck Gardon evidently was following a path he knew, one he had used before. But Wong did not know it.

To return to the regular trail and follow that would mean loss of too much time. If he dropped back and followed their tracks, he would come to the canyon finally and could go home. Cautiously he watched ahead, to be sure that while ascending some hill they would not look back and see him. Their boot tracks in the soft earth were easy to follow.

Wong realized they were not traveling as fast as he had been, going to Marysville from the canyon, and this route was longer. And it had taken him from dawn until dusk to make the trip. So he knew it would be night before the canyon was reached.

The men ahead stopped in the middle of the day to rest, and Wong was almost discovered as he approached them, scanning the ground for tracks. He hid behind some brush until they started on again. He saw them eating cold food, and knew the gnawings of hunger, for he had brought none himself.

When daylight faded, Wong went faster and got behind them as close as he could and be safe. The wind was still blowing from them to him, and his sandals made no noise. He could hear their boots crunching gravel and striking against rocks, and followed them by sound.

There came a time when Wong could hear, from the distance, a sound he knew came from the rushing of the creek over rocks in the canyon. A glance at the stars told him it was almost midnight.

Just before dawn was the most auspicious hour, he knew, for shooting off the sacred firecrackers. He was eager to get home, awaken Lee Chung and go through the ceremony. After what he had heard, he knew there was no time to lose if the demons of disaster were to be driven away before Chuck Gardon and his men made their raid.

Wong shuffled on in the wake of Gardon and the others. They went through another long ravine, then began climbing among the rocks. The noise of the rushing water came nearer.

The moon was up now, and Wong had to be careful that he was not seen. The men ahead were talking again, and the wind carried their words to his ears.

"We'll take a little rest, then get ready," Gardon was saying. "Make up the burro's packs and put the dust and nuggets among the stuff, like I said. Have a little snack to eat."

NOW they were working down among the rocks, and Wong had to follow them because there was no other way to go. They were descending to the floor of the canyon. Wong could see the white water below tumbling over the rocks in the moonlight.

And he realized that he was in a trap. Gardon and his two men were ahead of him, between him and Lee's cabin. The canyon was narrow along here, and there was only one path, and the walls could not be scaled. To get out of the canyon and work his way around to the mouth of the creek would take hours, Wong knew.

Finally they came down to the path and went along it, the men ahead hurrying now. Wong dropped behind, shuffling cautiously over the rocky path. When the men ahead reached Gardon's cabin, Wong went into hiding behind some rocks, to watch for an opportunity to pass the cabin and go on home.

They entered the cabin and lit candles, and one man emerged before Wong could make a move. The man built a fire, put on a coffeepot, and sliced bacon into a skillet. Through the open door of the cabin, Wong could see

Chuck Gardon and the other man making up packs.

The burro smelled the smoke of the fire and came wandering up the path from below, hee-hawing a welcome. The odors of boiling coffee and broiling bacon almost upset Wong's stomach because he was so hungry. He wished they would eat and all enter the cabin and close the door, so he could slip past.

The man at the fire called, and Gardon and the second man emerged and began eating.

"If Knowles and his men are intendin' to raid, they'll try it just before dawn," Wong heard Gardon say. "We want to get down the canyon and hit them Chinese while they're dopey with sleep, finish it there quick as we can, and go on down to Madison's place."

"How about the Vigilantes?" one of the men asked again.

"There's a chance we'll have to take. Mebbe they're not out here yet. But, on account of this new strike, they may be. Mebbe they're in ambush. If they are, I hope Knowles runs into 'em first."

"Suppose we run into 'em, Chuck?"

"If so, there's only one thing to do, and you both want to remember it. Drop everything and run. We're the same as swingin' at the end of ropes if we don't."

"If the dust and nuggets are in a pack on the burro—"

"We'll take time to grab that stuff, then make a getaway. There's a trail up the side of the canyon a quarter of a mile this side of the cabin them Chinese live in. We'll use that, get over the hills, and back to Marysville. Mebbe folks'll think we never left there. And we'll get on to Frisco as fast as we can."

They finished eating, but did not go into the cabin. Outside, by the fire, they were making the burro's packs ready. Wong could not get past them unseen. There was no sort of cover between the cabin and the wall of the canyon. And the firelight, added to the light of the moon and reflecting from the rock walls, made it so light that even a shadow could have been seen drifting past.

Crouching behind the rocks, Wong tried to think of a way out of the trap. Instead, when he looked toward the cabin again, he found instead a new peril. The burro was wandering up the path directly toward Wong's hiding place.

Wong crouched lower. He regretted now that he had made a friend of the burro by giving him sugar.

"Get that burro and bring the jackass back here!" Wong heard Chuck Gardon howl to one of the men.

The burro was coming on, and the man after him. Wong hugged the ground in the shadows. If they found him, he was done for, he thought. He had no weapon on him except a sharp knife.

But the man after the burro did not suspect anything, evidently. He yelled at the burro, who trotted on toward Wong. Then the man ran, caught the burro and turned him back just in time. Wong began breathing normally again.

Beside the fire, the three men put on the burro's pack frame and began packing it.

"Don't forget that this flour sack holds the stuff," Gardon told the others. "If we run into trouble, we'll tell a yarn about our claim bein' no good, and that we're goin' over to the American River and try our luck. Nobody'll think of investigatin' a flour sack. They'd expect us to be packin' any gold we had ourselves."

Wong prepared to make a wild dash if they all went into the cabin. They would be starting down the canyon soon, he knew, and he must get ahead of them and warn Lee and explode the sacred firecrackers to drive the demons of disaster away.

Finally, Gardon led the others into the cabin and closed the door. That gave Wong his chance. He left the protection of the rocks and began running, bending almost double, his worn sandals making but little noise, and the sound of the rushing water drowning that.

HE CAME even with the fire, and the burro saw him and hee-hawed with evident delight. Wong sped past him and went on. The burro began following, no doubt thinking of sugar. Wong got to some rocks and dropped behind them just as Gardon opened the door.

"Catch that fool burro and fetch him back!" he called to one of his men. "He's carryin' the stuff! Somethin' must have made him loco."

Wong crouched in a state of terror until the man had caught the burro and led him back. Then he went on, keeping in the shadows. When he got around a curve in the canyon and was hidden from the sight of those at the cabin, he put on speed.

He reached home and shook Lee Chung

awake. Gasping and panting, he poured out the story.

"We must shoot the sacred firecrackers," Wong said. "They will drive away the demons."

"I will hurry down to the Madison cabin," Lee Chung told him, "and let him know about this, while you shoot the firecrackers. Some of the Vigilantes are here. They caught a man named Knowles early last night, and three men with him. They were sluice box robbers. Madison and the Vigilantes will come to help."

"I thlink sacred firecracker maybe dlive demons away," Wong declared, remembering to speak "American."

Lee Chung hurried down the canyon trail. Wong washed his hands to purify them, unpacked the firecrackers, and got them ready. He muttered certain incantations. He strung out one string of the firecrackers, ignited a sulphur match, and lit the end of the string.

The firecrackers were good and loud, and the explosions echoed among the rocks. Wong began shouting his incantation in a shrill voice, determined to frighten the demons away. He ran into the cabin and got a huge pistol Lee kept there, but which he had never used on the thieves because they had always caught him asleep. Running outside again, Wong fired the pistol. It made a deafening roar among the rocks.

Wong would have been startled then if he could have seen what was happening and heard what was being said a short distance up the canyon.

Gardon and his men, the burro following, had neared the cabin on Lee's claim. They had pulled up neck handkerchiefs for masks. Suddenly, the night erupted. Explosion blasted and roared along the rocky canyon walls. Flashes of flame were reflected on the rocks.

"Gunfire!" one of the men said.

"Knowles got there ahead of us, and the Vigilantes are after him and his gang!" the second added.

They heard shrill yelling, and the thunderous explosion as Wong fired the old pistol. Gardon did not hesitate.

"Back!" he ordered. "Travel fast. They may come this way. Get up the trail to the top—it's only a hundred yards back. Hit for Marysville. We don't want any of this. Let Knowles have it!"

"The stuff on the burro—?" one questioned.

"Grab the flour sack and come on. Let the burro go. No time to lose!"

But the burro was gone already. The explosions and the flashes of fire were too much. He stampeded, running down the trail toward Lee's cabin, bucking and kicking to get off the packs.

A rope broke as the burro neared the cabin. The flour sack holding the pokes of dust and nuggets flew off to one side. Some of the cooking utensils dropped off also.

Wong had just lit the second string of firecrackers. They began exploding. The burro turned and rushed back up the trail, went past Gardon and the men like a streak, and continued. The three let him go. They were scrambling up the trail frantically, to get out of the canyon and away.

Lee Chung came back with Madison and several grim-looking men who were heavily armed.

Wong was dancing around excitedly.

"Velly loud sacred firecracker," he told them. "I think they drive demons of disaster away."

"You stay here with Wong, Lee," Madison instructed. He turned to the men with him. "We'll go on up the canyon and see if Gardon and his two men are in their cabin. If they are, we'll drive 'em out of the district."

They started on their futile errand, for Gardon and his men at that moment had reached the top of the canyon wall and were on their way to Marysville.

Wong was tired and hungry, but happy. Lee Chung started to build a fire to cook food. Wong wandered a short distance up the trail, listening to the sounds in the canyon.

But soon he came rushing back, holding a flour sack and shouting for Lee Chung.

"Look!" he cried. "Find this beside trail. Here is the poke they stole from you. Here is the little package of nuggets. Here is more gold in little sacks. Not only did the sacred firecrackers drive away the demons of disaster, but the gods make the burro drop this sack at our feet, and we have the stolen gold and some extra. Perhaps that is because I gave the burro sugar. The gods like men who are kind to animals."

"The gods at times have what seem to us to be strange ways," Lee Chung told him, "but they are always profitable. Come and eat your rice and pork and drink your tea."

Wayne Morgan at His Fighting Best in HOUNDS OF PERDITION, Next Issue!

The killer flinched, but the hand moving toward his gun stopped as he saw the marshal's gun

SHOTGUN'S KICK

By BARRY SCOBEE

Kindly Marshal Mose Hainley knows plenty about weapons, as he proves when his gun savvy leads him to a killer!

A SHOTGUN'S loud blast in the windy darkness of a Southwestern March did not hurry Mose Hainley's steps. He did not like to arrive at the scene of a shooting hurried and out of breath.

Running feet sounded on the board sidewalks of the adobe cowtown and excited voices blew with the dust. Hainley saw a stir of men against the open door and the window of Deeds Harris' two-room house. As he reached the crowd he saw that a windowpane had a round hole in it large enough for him to thrust his knotty fist through.

"Here's the marshal," someone warned in a low tone.

Mose Hainley's rumbling voice matched his big bony frame as he asked in his slow way:

"What's happened here?" He stepped into the doorway.

"Somebody stopped Morg Tysor's clock with a shotgun," another voice said in flat satisfaction.

Deeds Harris was a bachelor. The litter in the house proved it. The floor was covered with the spoor of frequent poker games that Harris encouraged for the sake of his rake-off. In the middle of the room was a round table and pushed-back chairs. The place was lighted by two kerosene lamps on opposite walls. At the side of the table next to the inner wall, and in line with the window with the circular black hole, the body of robust Morgan Tysor was slumped in a chair.

Mose straightened the body. The chest was a bloody wreck. He let the body slump again. He ran his hand around the curved back of the hickory chair. It was rough with tiny splinters and embedded shot. He picked out a leaden pellet and rolled it across his deep-lined palm.

"Buckshot," he said. "Both barrels must have been fired to do a job like that on Morg."

The room was half-filled now, with more men banked at the door, craning in. They were watching Mose in avid interest, because he had a reputation for uncovering evidence and putting his big finger on killers. Mose raked over them with his frosty eyes that were faded and squinted by the winds of fifty winters.

"Who killed him?" he rumbled, accusing every man there, and when none of the suddenly blank, careful faces answered, he put another: "Who was settin' in this game?"

"Me," spoke up Deeds Harris. "And Morg, and Tony Aguilar, and George Lemon—let's see, that's four—Oh yes, and Slim Sleighter."

"Who was in that chair?" Mose demanded, pointing to the seat that was on a line between the hole in the window and the body of Morgan Tysor.

WHATEVER small stir was in the crowd stopped still. For the question was loaded. The player who had sat there had got up and left a clear path for the sleet of buckshot. Otherwise he would have been hit. The obvious next question would be, "Had he moved out of the way as an accomplice of the man outside with the shotgun?"

"That was my place at the table, Mose," Deeds Harris said. "I laid my hand down—it wasn't no good, a pair of sixes—and went out to the kitchen to fetch some matches. 'Fore I got back I heard the shotgun beller. I didn't know anybody was goin' to shoot and I don't know who done it. So that lets me out."

"On your own say-so," Mose grunted, and took up the five cards that must be Deeds Harris' abandoned hand. Sure enough, it held a pair of sixes, nothing more. Mose jabbed a finger at Harris.

"Who told Morg to set there, where he is?"

"Nobody," Harris declared. "He always picked that spot so's he could lean back against the wall. Yuh can prove it by half the poker players in town."

Mose studied the slumped body. He bent and lifted the right hand, a hand that had pulled a fatal trigger on three men in the last year. The fingers still clutched five playing cards. Mose drew them free and spread them on the table. Two pair—aces and eights.

"The dead man's hand!" somebody gasped in awe.

At that gasp, Mose Hainley's stare rode the crowd. Gamblers and killers were nearly all superstitious. He tried to catch a face startled naked in superstition. Half the men before him had killings on their records, justified or not. One was Fine Strickland; another, Lannie Kleemuns. A third was John Wesley Hardin, already famous in the annals of Texas gun history, with a list of victims reputed to be longer than Billy the Kid's. He had been in the Texas penitentiary for years, had studied law, and led a reckless life. But neither he nor any of the others quailed in the least before Mose's faded winter gaze.

Mose felt cheated, defeated. Chances were the killer was right here and he couldn't pick him out. His roving glance caught a pinch of matches still in Harris' fingers. He asked for them, and went outside, the crowd making grudging but respectful way for his bony figure. Mose Hainley and his steadfast sense of duty, not to mention his shrewdness, was an offense to lawbreakers, yet always to be reckoned with.

Outside, his big hat shielded match flames from the air eddies as he scanned the bare ground. A China tree, its stiff stems whipped bare by winter winds but still holding frost-bitten clusters of yellow berries, grew four

paces from the window. Near its base, among dropped berries, his matches found two yellow-paper shotgun shells with brass butts.

"Twelve-gauge," he mumbled, as the last match burned out. "Only twelve-gauge shotgun I know of in this town belongs to the undertaker."

The crowd sniggered, its tension letting down.

"Mebbe old Rogge has been makin' some business for hisself," an unseen man said.

Mose felt that he could do no more here, now.

"Don't mess with the body," he told the crowd. "I'll go get Rogge to come up and look after it."

Rogge—it was spoken with a round O—sold hardware and coffins. Mose tried the back door of his store. It opened, and he entered. At once his eyes lit on a double-barreled shotgun leaning just inside. He lifted it and was fitting the two empty shells by the time Rogge came back there.

"Rogge," said Mose, "looks like this gun of yores killed Morgan Tysor a while ago."

"My gun?" Rogge yelped. "Where'd yuh get it?"

"The man that done the killin' must have opened the door"—Mose thumbed to the spot—"and leaned it back inside."

"But how'd he get it? I keep that gun over in that corner."

"Yuh lend it to anybody?"

"No I didn't! I don't know who had it. And I don't know who killed that loud-mouth Morg Tysor."

Rogge had never been accused of lying or dishonesty. Mose put the gun back.

"Yuh'd better get up there and handle the body," he said. "Reckon his friends will chip in and pay the expenses. I've got to keep on down the trail of possible killers."

Mose left the store by the front way. The crowd was trickling back from the scene of the slaying, steering for the Haymaker Saloon. As Mose passed the place he could hear the hum of talk inside. He didn't like it. A lot of these men were—he used a phrase he had heard a preacher say—emotionally unstable. There were killers and gamblers and robbers. Many drank too much, some were wanted by the law somewhere, and were touchy.

A killing always set such men's minds to jigging. The level heads of the community would probably keep clear of the Haymaker tonight. But some rattlepate would be sure to fly off the handle. No use to let one of them, deserving though he might be, get himself shot.

Mose turned back to the saloon. As he entered and heel-pushed the door to behind him he saw that trouble was already champing at the bit. He caught the high-pitched words of a young fellow who was standing alone in the middle of the big crowded room.

"Yes, I said I'd kill him! I didn't mean it. I was mad. He called me a loud-mouth and told me to keep away from poker games he was in. I ain't even been up there where he was killed."

"Quit lyin'!" a cowboy who had been a pard of Morg Tysor droned nasally. "Rogge's shotgun blasted Morg, and you work for Rogge."

The twenty-five or so men in the place looked past the lone youth to the town marshal. The young fellow whirled around.

"Marshal Hainley!" he cried. "They're accusin' me of shootin' Morg Tysor!"

MOSE slowly enrolled the crowd in his memory. John Wesley Hardin stood midway of the room with his back to the wall. It was his custom. This left only his front and two sides to watch. His frequent companions, Fine Strickland and Lannie Kleemuns, were at his sides. Other fast gunnies were sprinkled around. But nobody made a truculent move. Perhaps because Mose had his gun in his fist, down at the side of his leg.

To have one's gun out and ready was not ethical in killer lore. It suggested a lack of confidence, or cowardice, on the part of the officer. But this was a special concession allowed Mose Hainley by public opinion. He was notoriously slow. A wit had said of him that as compared to the drawing speed of speedy men the editor could be writing Mose's obituary before Mose's gun was out of its leather. Mose readily conceded the point.

Men had boasted that even at that they could draw and shoot before Mose could level his gun and fire. Two had tried it in the past year. They were now out in Boot Hill in the cold March wind. Mose never referred to the incidents. He was not proud of them. It was just part of a monotonous job. And he continued to make use of his permitted handicap—the gun down at his

(Turn to page 80)

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side. Carefully and ethically he never raised it until the jam was on.

As Mose's big gangling, steady figure strode forward, a sharp thought was in his mind all at once. The youth in the middle of the room, alone, squealed in protest.

"Mr. Hainley, yuh ain't goin' to arrest me! I didn't do it!"

Mose laid his knobby hand on the boy's shoulder. Roughly he turned him around to face the crowd. A sort of gentle, assured smile came upon his face, and he shook his head at the watching men.

"Doley didn't shoot Morg," he told them. "Yuh can bet on it." And to the young fellow: "Doley, yuh're goin' to lose yore job with Rogge if yuh don't get over tryin' to be a shinin' light with these hardheads that are tougher than you. Now get out of here till yuh grow up."

"Thanks, Marshal," the youngster yipped, and seemed to get to the door without taking steps.

"Steve," Mose said to the bartender, "sell the boys another drink apiece if any's wantin' it, then chouse 'em out and lock yore doors for the night."

"Hey, what the—" began the white-aproned man.

"If yuh don't want customers' blood on yore floor, Steve."

"Mose is right, Steve," spoke up John Wesley Hardin. "Tempers are on the loose tonight. Best we all get out of here and go to our beds."

"Thanks, Wesley," said Mose. And to the crowd: "I'm up most of the night. I wouldn't want to see yuh go gangin' up somewheres else. Good night, boys."

He seated himself on an empty beer keg to see that they left.

Mose Hainley had a way of saying that he never crawled out of the feathers until noon. This day his dinner was finished and he was plodding his usual rounds by one o'clock. More men had come to town. News of killings, with its stealthly way of spreading far and wide, always brought ranchmen and cowboys.

The country had been settled long enough now for the substantial, law-abiding citizens to reach a stage of dislike for the wild and lawless element. Antagonism was stacking up between them. Last night's wanton killing might set off tempers and guns at the

(Turn to page 82)

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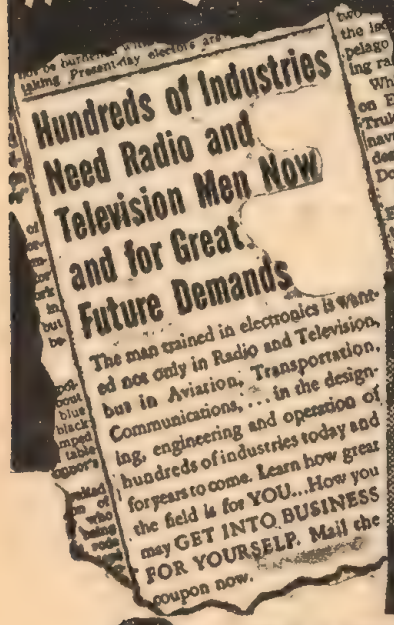
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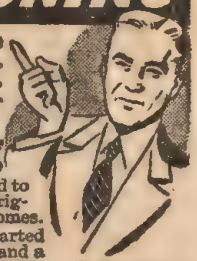

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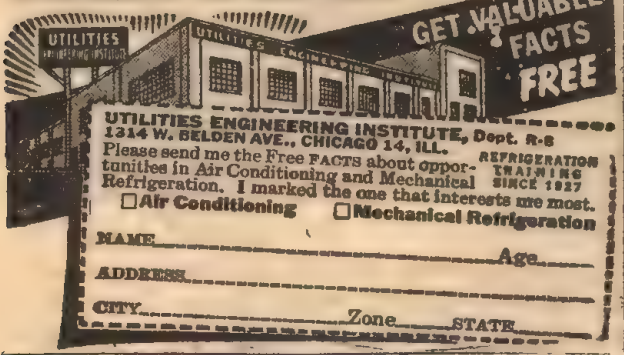

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drop of a hat if Morg Tysor's slayer wasn't corralled without delay.

Mose dreaded the blood and tragedy of such an outbreak. Yet he did not show it in his manner. He was unusually affable as he greeted men he knew. Almost rowdy at times, jerking their arms as he shook hands, or laying his big knobby hand on their shoulders in rough good nature.

He met the sheriff, who looked down in the mouth. That lawman questioned him about the shooting, saying he had just got back to town. Mose retailed the story.

"Ted," Mose finished, "I want yuh to ride close herd on me. I'm goin' to uncover that killer right soon, mebbe. It could start a peck of trouble quick. I want yuh handy."

"Trouble's breathin' down yore collar, Mose," the sheriff declared. "They're plumb peeled about you gettin' bull-headed and closin' the Haymaker last night. Say yuh're swingin' too much authority. You start to make an arrest and some trigger-finger is likely to go nervous."

"Keep handy, Ted. We'll save another killin'."

Soon after they separated Mose saw the three cronies, John Wesley Hardin, Lannie Kleemuns and Fine Strickland with half a dozen other men. They all appeared to be listening to Kleemuns' hearty, windy gab and laughing. Mose saw Kleemuns lean against the building where they were gathered and push away again with a sudden frown. Kleemuns had little use for the marshal.

Mose sauntered up and caught Hardin's eye. "Let me speak with yuh, Wesley," he said, "if Lannie's story ain't too interestin'."

"I've heard it before," Hardin said dryly, and came away from the group.

He gave the windy, dusty street a swift scanning. He was always doing that—the price he paid for his career, which he claimed had been thrust upon him.

"The Haymaker?" he asked.

"Too many in there," said Mose. "Let's amble back here."

They moved along an adobe wall, away from the sidewalk and out of the wind. When they stopped, Hardin searched Mose's eyes sharply, and looked down to see if Mose had his gun beside his leg. Mose did not have it, and the ex-convict flicked a tight grin.

"I never could talk confidential standin' up," said Mose. "Let's squat."

He folded down with his back to the rough

wall. When Hardin saw that he was in a shape difficult for a draw he too squatted, elbow to elbow with Mose.

"Thanks, Wesley," said Mose.

He always called Hardin, Wesley. It was a small satire of his own, allusion to the celebrated brothers, James and John Wesley, whom he recalled as the founders of Methodism. He knew that Hardin did not miss the dig, but took it good-naturedly.

"Confidential?" Hardin mentioned.

"Wesley," Mose asked, "why did Lannie Kleemuns kill Morg Tysor?"

HARDIN froze to the stillness of an alarmed animal. Minutes passed. Mose waited with the patience of a slow and knobby man used to the cautions of the touchy Frontier. He knew that the former outlaw was asking himself with all the hard intelligence of his mind why Mose had asked the question.

Mose did not care why Kleemuns had killed Tysor. What he was fishing for was verification of his own almost certainty that Kleemuns was guilty. But more than that he wished to know whether, if he had to arrest Kleemuns, Hardin would throw in with Kleemuns or the law. Lives would depend on which way Hardin moved.

At last Hardin shiftly slightly and spoke, in the whole sentence a protesting inflection: "I'm not sayin' he killed him."

"I'm not askin' yuh to, Wesley. I'm askin' why he done so."

Another silence, that spun out until the golden Southwestern afternoon sunshine made heat against the mud wall and put heaviness in Mose's eyes. The moods and motives of the outlaws were a never-ending wonder to him. He felt that this talk with Hardin might be history written on the pages of his memory.

"Yuh know," Hardin said at last, "that ever since Morg Tysor killed Bill Butterworth in the Haymaker a few weeks ago Morg had been gettin' loud and chesty and passed out word that he wasn't afraid of Lannie Kleemuns. Yuh right certain, Mose, that Lannie killed Morg?"

"Practically so."

Hardin was silent again, thoughtfully flipping little chips of stone at the toe of his boot. What was going on in that crafty mind, Mose wondered. Was Hardin afraid of Klee-

[*Turn page*]

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muns? Rather, was he afraid of treachery in Kleemuns, a shot in the back? Was he delicately, scheming against Kleemuns?

If now Hardin said the words that would be an admission, or declaration, that Kleemuns had blasted the life out of Tysor last night, then Mose would know that Hardin did not trust Kleemuns.

John Wesley Hardin stirred again, and slapped dust from his hand in a smack of finality. When he spoke it was the educated lawyer who found words.

"Tell you, Mose, killings like last night are a never-ceasing source of speculation to me. They spring, in the last analysis, from purely psychological causes. Some gunnies can't stand the thought of a competitor. Or they get afraid of a new star in the firmament. It's a hard thing to comprehend, even for me. I've never killed for any reason but self-defense—well, anyhow, I've never killed because I thought somebody was getting faster than me on the draw.

"Lannie is a fool. He hasn't learned what I have learned in sleepless prison nights of thinking. Hasn't learned that you can't go against the law, hasn't learned judgment. If I had my life to live over again, from the first necessary killing, I don't say I wouldn't do just about the same as I have done. Through necessity. But I do say you can't buck the statutes of public opinion and go wild. Unstable emotions are dangerous."

Mose chuckled silently in the deep well of himself. Hardin had talked a lot and said nothing. Hardin, the lawyer, had not committed himself in any way you could pin him down. But in his last sentence he had spilled the beans, let the cat out of the bag. They unfolded to their feet.

"Thanks, John," Mose said gently. "I'm goin' to arrest Lannie now."

Hardin made no reply. He stumped away.

Lannie Kleemuns was still putting on his windy gab to the group of idle listeners. Fine Strickland was only half-listening. He seemed thoughtful and bored. Mose joined the group and listened to Kleemuns finishing his tale. Mose saw Hardin catch Strickland's eyes. In quick relief Strickland edged away. He and Hardin went strolling off along the board walk.

Kleemuns finished his story and got his laugh, laughing himself more heartily than the others. Then he missed Hardin and Strickland, and was faintly startled as he

discovered Mose at his elbow. "Hello, Lannie," said Mose, and chunked down with his great knobby hand on Kleemuns' shoulder.

Kleemuns flinched, and stepped back a pace, and looked at Mose. His eyes darkened and his lips hardened in a straight line across his round face. His hand made a faint move toward his gun, hardly more than a muscular twitch. But stopped as he saw Mose's gun down at the side of Mose's leg. Perhaps he remembered the two men who had thought they could beat Mose to the blast and were now out in Boot Hill.

"Lannie," said Mose, in his rumbling, kindly-grim way, "that boy in the Haymaker last night didn't flinch when I squeezed his shoulder. I saw you flinch away from the wall there, a while ago. Yuh flinched just now, Lannie. A twelve-gauge shotgun stuffed with buckshot, and both barrels fired at once, kicks harder'n a Government mule. I know, because I tried it once and had a sore shoulder for a month. Lannie, here comes the sheriff. He's takin' yuh to jail for firin' that shotgun last night."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, of Masked Rider Western, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Ill., for October 1, 1945. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Masked Rider Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation,) etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. HERBERT, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1945. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1946.

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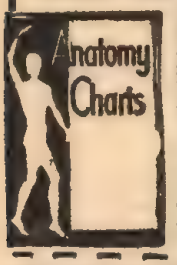

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Bemis lunged to his feet

GUNMAN'S CHALLENGE

By HAL WHITE

Deputy Rockney Proves He's Not a Windblown Weather Vane!

THE Golden Rooster Saloon wore a symbol atop its false front. It was an ancient tin weathervane, cut in the shape of a crowing rooster, and once painted yellow.

The rooster never did crow. But when the wind blew, hot Montana wind raised dust devils in the street, the vane turned on its pivot, squeaking rustily.

Usually the saloon was so clamorous with roaring talk, boots and spurs, the slap of cards and the jangle of the ancient piano that the rooster's squeak went unheard and unheeded.

But now had come a moment of such tense silence that the noise of the rusty weathervane atop the saloon echoed through the smoke-filled barroom.

Four men were at a poker table. A dozen more stood watching the cards that lay face-up on the wood. No one spoke. No one moved.

On the cheeks of the cool-eyed cowboy gamester who sat against the window, sweat furrowed the alkali dust as it slowly ran downward to his chin.

Here was a tension that had to break, that would break, and did break with savage, explosive suddenness.

The cool-eyed puncher by the name of Bemis glanced from the table cards to the triumphant glitter in the light blue eyes of the hombre across from him. Then Bemis went for his six-gun.

Bemis got the .45 clear of leather. A backward thrust of his foot sent his chair crashing against the wall.

He lunged to his feet.

But the other hombre was infinitely faster. It was not the weapon in Bemis' hand that spoke first.

A bullet from his foe's up-whipping gun ripped into Bemis' shirt, right over the heart. A second slug hit the falling puncher atop the shoulder and went on to make a jangling mess of the window behind him.

So fast did the fracas happen that the dozen standing men moved without direction, like torn paper in a sudden gust.

Bemis never was able to trigger. He died falling floorward.

Two of the killer's companions at the card table did not even bother to get up.

The hawk-faced hombre who had shot Bemis, moved back a step, tilting the muzzle of his smoking weapon significantly at the fleeing bystanders.

"You all saw it." His words were cold, clipped, incisive. "We went for his hog-leg. What he got is what will happen to any hombre hintin' that Tex Gannon is a card cheat."

A breeze pushed through the broken window, nudged at the thin drift of powder smoke, and everyone heard the squeaking of the weathervane. Then a stranger's voice cut the silence.

"Long ways from home, ain't yuh, Gannon?"

The speaker had just joined the group from outside. Short and squatty, he shoved through the press of men and bent over the fallen puncher.

When he straightened, light reflected from a sheriff's star on his vest.
reflected from a sheriff's star on his vest.

Tex Gannon's eyes narrowed.

"Texas to Montana is a long ways. Like to make something of it, lawman?"

As he spoke, he deliberately thrust his long-barreled Colt back into its holster, and

[*Turn page*]

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stood with hands dangling easily at his sides.

Sheriff Rance Hubbell, second in command in Bluestone county, bit down on his quid.

"Reckon it was a fair fight." He glanced around for corroboration and got several nods.

"Bemis drawed first," Gannon remarked coldly. "I give 'em all the same chance."

He grinned down at his two table companions, one of whom nonchalantly riffled the cards through his fingers.

Hubbell gagged on his tobacco quid. He hadn't missed the significance of Gannon's words.

"Fair fight. None of my needin's." The lawman turned to the spectators. "Help me with Bemis, hombres."

Tex Gannon turned to the bar.

"I'll be around any time yuh want to see me, lawman."

Hubbell, helping carry the body of Jack Bemis, heard. His ears turned a dull red as he went out the front door.

WHEN Doc Engel, the town undertaker, was given the body and told the news, he whistled softly through his teeth.

"Texas Bob Gannon, eh? Made a big name for himself in the Panhandle, if I remember right."

"Yeah," said Hubbell. "He was shot bad in a lone-wolf holdup, bank job, 'bout a year ago. Folks figgered he hid out in the hills and died. Now he shows up here."

"Where's Deputy Bill Rockney?" Doc Engel asked.

"Servin' a warrant," Hubbell said, flushing. "Back soon." He turned to the men who had helped with the body. "Was Gannon cheatin'?"

Bearded Pete Parris answered.

"Couldn't be sure. But that killin' was murder. Bemis had no chance 'gainst that draw. Gannon seems to be darin' anybody in this here town of Bluestone to take up the chips Bemis was playin'."

"When Rockney gets back he'll take Gannon up," Doc Engel said.

Hubbell squirmed.

"Rockney will try, you mean," said Pete Parris. "Bill Rockney ain't met a real test yet. That's what comes of appointin' an hombre jest 'cause yuh like the way he carries himself and his likker. Me, I figure—Hey, there's Rockney comin' now."

In the sheriff's office, a minute later, Hubbell told Rockney what had happened. Outside, a little knot of men waited expectantly for action.

Tall, lean, rawhide tough, Rockney sat in his desk and chewed on his pipe while the sheriff talked. Hubbell was red-faced, sweating, miserably embarrassed by his own failure to take up the saloon challenge, but hon-

est in his admission.

When he had finished, the young deputy sat in sober thought. Then he got up, laid a hand on the sheriff's shoulder.

"I'm not blamin' you, boss. Not any. This Tex Gannon hung up a rep for himself in the Panhandle as the fastest gunman in the Southwest. And Jack Bemis did draw first, you said?"

"Bemis did, sure enough."

Rockney grinned slowly. "It seems this Gannon has throwed it right in our teeth that he's runnin' this town as long as he wants to stay. Mebbe he is. Let me find out. Just him and me, understand?"

A group of townspeople, who were expecting trouble, fell in with the tall deputy as he headed for the Golden Rooster Saloon. They didn't know much about this Rockney lawman, who had drifted into town with the Montana wind and tumbleweeds. Rockney had been named a deputy because Hubbell needed a real man to rod the county outside of town.

The citizens knew even less about Tex Gannon, except for his rep, which was so sinister that no one could believe Deputy Rockney had the ability to beat him to the draw. It was Rockney's fight, and as much as the town liked him, nobody would side him unless Gannon's two comrades took a hand.

Rockney shoved through the swinging doors of the saloon. Behind him came Hubbell and the others. Rockney advanced alone down the barroom toward Gannon and the two gunnies at the far end of the brass rail.

Gannon's pale eyes flamed cold fire. He shoved away from the bar, away from his companions, and stood alone.

Deputy Rockney halted. In the silence, the wind made small sounds through the broken window. The squeaking of the weather vane rasped on tense nerves. Rockney's voice fell quietly—

"I hear Jack Bemis drew first, Gannon. But that ain't all."

"Givin' you the same chance, lawman," Gannon sneered.

"Card sharks are not wanted in Bluestone, Gannon. Better drift."

"Nobody calls me a cheat and lives," the Texas gunman shrilled.

His long fingers hovered close to his gun butts.

"Make your play, hombre," Deputy Rockney invited coolly.

Gannon's taloned fingers made their thrust, closed on cedar. They touched wood before the sheriff's hands moved at all.

Rockney's hands blurred. They seemed merely to beckon and the guns leaped to slap

[*Turn page*]

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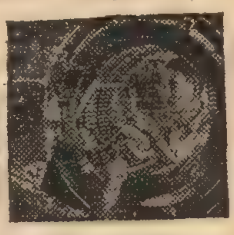

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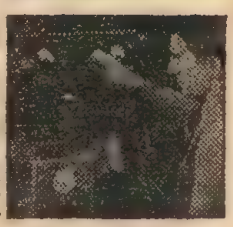

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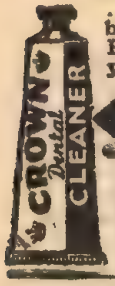

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into waiting palms. Gun thunder rocked the room, slammed the eardrums.

Gannon raised to his toes. His guns crashed, but their slugs drove into the floor on either side of his convulsive figure. Then the Texas killer folded downward.

The gunsmoke swirled and eddied in the draft, tainting the barroom with an acrid odor. There was the thin music of the wind in the broken window and the squeaking of the weathervane atop the false front of the Golden Rooster. It was a dirge, rusty funeral music played on tin, for a tin gunman who had met cold steel and failed to stand up.

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 10)

sentenced to be hanged; this sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment, and still later both chiefs were paroled.

Satanta broke parole, returned to raiding and killing, was again captured, and this time leaped to his death from the upper window of a prison building. Big Tree devoted his later years to christianizing his people. He died in 1929.

An Adventurous Business

At the southern edge of Jacksboro is the site of one of the early day Butterfield stage coach stations. The Butterfield stage coaches and the stage line played an important part in the development, not only of a portion of Texas but the Southwest and the West, and if there was ever a business linked with romance, adventure and tragedy it was those early day stage coach lines.

On down the trail over which cattlemen used to drive great herds of longhorn on the northward trek, we pass Weatherford, Stephenville and reach Lampasas, where the spaciousness of Texas is reflected in unusually broad streets. In its large public square, an old two-story courthouse dominates the surrounding business district.

Most of the store buildings are of stone, aged and worn by years. During the 1870s this town had its wild era when cowboys on the long cattle trails rode in to "blow off a little stream."

Today Lampasas is an important shipping point for livestock, pecans, wool, mohair and furs.

Wild Country

In the early days this region was open range, with thousands of wild Texas longhorns. Pioneer cattlemen fought Indians, for the Comanches harassed settlers until 1875,

when a combined campaign of soldiers and Texas Rangers drove them farther west.

In a Lampasas saloon facing the town square the Horrels, pioneer bad men, shot and killed an officer and three members of the State police in 1873. The affair was the result of an attempt on the part of the radical Governor E. J. Davis, to tame the then wild cow town. The Horrels fled the state, but returned in 1877 again to precipitate bloody action in the Horrel-Higgins family feud, which wound up in a blaze of gunfire when the two factions fought it out in the public square with more than fifty men taking part in the battle. The arrival of a company of Texas Rangers put an end to the hostilities.

Opposite the Santa Fe Station in Lampasas is the Keystone Hotel, still in use, which served passengers of stage lines. It was built in 1856, of limestone.

Today, although modernized, it retains to some extent the picturesque atmosphere of the old days.

Longhorn State Park

Not many miles away is Longhorn State Park and Longhorn Cavern. Although the cavern is only partly explored, its known length is more than 11 miles. It contains numerous winding tunnels and large rooms along and within which are weird formations in limestone and crystal. In the cavern are the Dome Room, the five crystal rooms (presenting a huge deposit of Iceland spar), the Main Room, Cathedral Room, the Fountain of Youth, the Queen's Throne, the Silent Watcher, the Pink Elephants, the suspended Boulder, and many other chambers and formations.

The cavern was a hiding place for Indians and outlaws, and powder was manufactured in it during the Civil War. The gang of the notorious Texas outlaw, Sam Bass, took refuge here following several robberies, and the cavern's main opening is called the "Sam Bass entrance."

A trip to Texas would not be complete without a trip to the Big Bend Country, a vast area of wild country which lays in the big bend of the Rio Grande River. Here is a great section of country that is as beautiful as it is wild, and here we reach the quaint little town of Hidalgo. Its population of 650 is idle, almost motionless, and most of them are asleep each afternoon in their customary siestas.

The town has often been swept by floods, raided by bandits, and in the years before irrigation, scourged by droughts when the brown flow of the Rio Grande dwindled to a thin trickle meandering down the middle of its sandy bed.

[*Turn page*]

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The years of prohibition brought to Hidalgo thirsty thousands seeking relief in the saloons of the Mexican town of Reynosa, across the river.

The fact that one could practically cross the Rio Grande afoot at this point during the dry season, which was most of the year, together with the wildness of the Big Bend country and its numerous places where bandits and smugglers could hide, made this point a mecca for that class of lawbreakers. It was so noted that Texas Rangers often swooped down upon that town, or silently watched from concealment, and then tracked outlaws and smugglers to their lairs, where in many instances pitched battles took place.

The trail, now a highway, bears almost due east, bearing closely to the winding of the river and following the course of the Old Military Road laid out by U. S. engineers during the Mexican War. Along this road marched General Taylor's troops on their way to attack Monterey, and along this same road Texas Rangers and U. S. Army detachments have fought raiding Mexican bandits.

Primitive Antiquity

The atmosphere in this section is one of primitive antiquity, little changed from the days of no roads or highways, just trails. The very houses seem to have sprung from the soil in the tinge of unpainted adobe. The tiny towns that dot the highway bear an appearance as foreign as their names. Progreso, Santa Maria, Los Indios, offspring of a pioneer ranch, and La Paloma, having the title of a Spanish love song.

Throughout this section there are few modern improvements, oil lamps and flickering tallow wicks gleam in the windows of homes and store buildings, and much of the family cooking is done over charcoal braziers in the yards. Many of the houses are mere jacales of mud and sticks, but few are so humble that a flowering potted plant or two does not rest on a little bench beside the doorstep.

Ten miles from La Paloma we come to Santa Rita. It is hardly recognizable as a town. The two or three adobes, old and weatherworn, that stand beside the highway, appear to always have been there. There is nothing to indicate that in 1859 this was the ranch home of Jaun Nepomubeno Cortinas, Mexican Robin Hood, also Cheno and the Red Robber of the Rio Grande, a picturesque red-bearded character who for a time was a thorn in the side of certain Texans and a hero in the eyes of many of his fellow countrymen.

To Texas peace officers he was a bandit; to certain peons and Mexican landholders he

was a daring champion of liberty and legal rights, and whichever he was there is no denying the fact that he was daring.

A colorful border episode started one July morning in 1859 when Cortinas rode into Brownsville for his morning coffee. The town marshal, in arresting a drunken peon who had formerly been Cortinas' servant, became more abusive than Cortinas thought proper. The young Mexican remonstrated with the officer, who cursed him, and Cortinas shot the marshal in the shoulder.

While the officer helplessly clutched his wound, Cortinas dragged the peon up behind him on his horse, and galloped out of town. That incident changed Cortinas from a suspected cattle thief—although a member of the wealthy class of Mexican ranchers—into a militant champion of his people.

Some of the non-Latin Texans of the period, through process of law and otherwise, were confiscating desirable land held by Mexicans on the north bank of the river. Cortinas declared that the method of taking their lands was illegal and that if necessary he would resist by force. And he did.

About two months after the shooting of the marshal, and while Brownsville was sleeping off a hangover from a big ball held the evening before in Matamoris, Cortinas, with about a hundred followers, swept into town, shooting and yelling.

They raced through the streets, terrorized the inhabitants, killed five men who offered resistance, sacked stores, turned prisoners out of jail, and threatened to burn the town. Cortinas especially sought to locate the marshal, but was unsuccessful.

While he held the town he kept the frightened citizens indoors, and his men caroused on the streets and in the public square. Finally, through the influence of some Mexican officials, Cortinas was persuaded to ride back to Santa Rita.

After that wild raid on Brownsville, Cortinas led a band in many robberies and depredations, and finally after several battles with soldiers and Texas Rangers, during which time the law on the American side had caused the stopping of the land-grabbing from the Mexicans, Cortinas finally fled the border, went to the interior of Mexico, joined the Army and became a Brigadier General.

Well, pardners, I guess we have come to the end of this trail so I'll be saying *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

Our Next Issue

MURDER was stalking the range on the night Wayne Morgan and his saddle pard, Blue Hawk, spread their bedrolls in

[*Turn page*]

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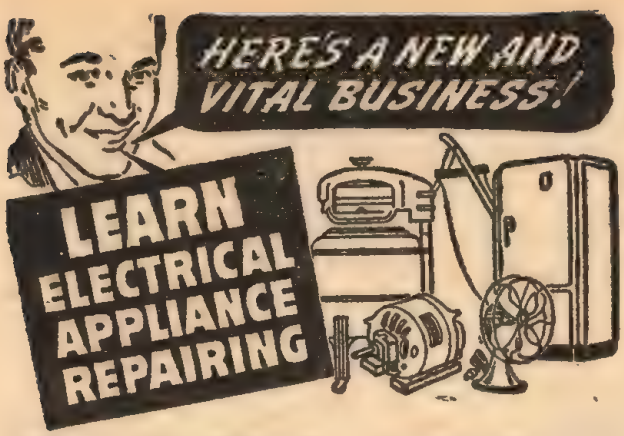

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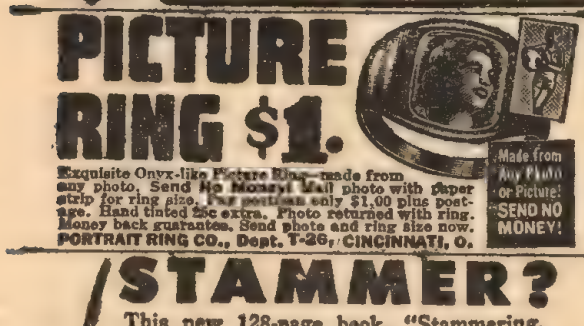
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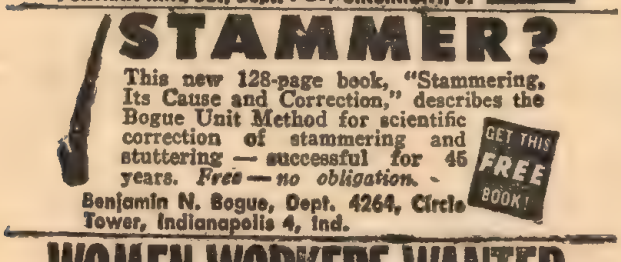
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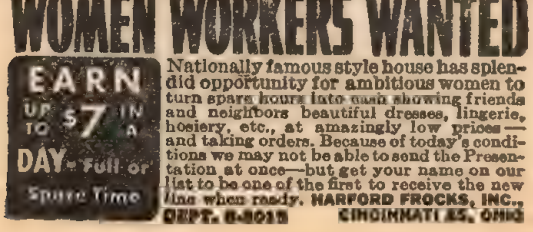
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Windigo Basin. Strong evidence of foul play drifted with the wind across the timbered slopes to their sharp ears. They heard the far-off cry of a dog pack. Then came the echo of a shot, and a rider's scream.

Another adventure had begun for the Masked Rider—a spine-tingling mystery story of the wild cattle country, which takes Wayne Morgan and his Indian partner into their deadliest peril. Gunnison Steele is the author of this novel entitled HOUNDS OF PERDITION coming next issue.

The moment that Blue Hawk slipped away in the night to investigate the death cry, Wayne Morgan sensed the danger haunting Windigo Basin. He sat with his back to a pine sapling, listening intently to the snapping of twigs, the soft thud of padded feet, and a strange snuffling. He saw nothing in the darkness, but he slid the two weapons at his hips from their holsters.

The story scene continues:

The stealthy, sinister sounds continued, sometimes far out in the underbrush, sometimes just outside the red circle of firelight. Once a shadowy, slinking figure crept into the edge of the red circle. Morgan saw a pair of reddish, unblinking eyes glaring at him. But beyond this, and the fact that it was a monstrously huge dog, he could tell nothing about the beast.

He could have killed the dog. But instead, he sat perfectly motionless, and the beast slunk back into the shadows.

Wayne Morgan was puzzled by all this. Did the dogs mean to attack, or had they merely been drawn to the fire by curiosity? The wisest course, he decided, was to wait and find out.

Several moments passed. The darkness, alive with those stealthy, menacing sounds, seemed to crowd in closer to the fire. Morgan, inured to all kinds of danger, again felt that cold prickling along his spine. He sat motionless, every sense alert, awaiting Blue Hawk's return—or for the dogs to attack.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the underbrush behind him. There was a sharp, wicked curse, sounds of a brief, furious struggle. Morgan whirled to his feet, surprise flickering at his face at what he saw.

Blue Hawk had stepped into the firelight. The Yaqui had his knife in his hand—and the point of the knife was held against the back of an incredibly tall and huge man!

The man's clothes were in tatters, with hairy flesh showing through the rents. His feet were encased in hair-covered moccasins, while his bare head, bulbous and wholly bald, was disfigured by a ragged scar high on the left side of his temple. His hands were huge, his hairy arms long and powerful. A rivulet of blood ran over one side of his bony face.

The man's yellowish eyes glowed with an inward fire that might have been hate or cruelty, or merely anger. Under the pressure of Blue Hawk's knife he shuffled forward awkwardly.

Wayne Morgan, watching the shambling figure, was suddenly aware that several of the dogs—immense, brindle, savage-looking creatures—had come into the firelight, slinking forward on their bellies. The brutes were growling softly, their fangs bared, their eyes wickedly aglare.

It is about the character of the owner of these animals that the author has built his next great Wayne Morgan novel. Ben Dark is as savage as any dog in his man-hunting pack, and he is the most feared hombre in Windigo Basin. His hatred of all strangers turns upon Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk. And when they start digging at the roots of Ben Dark's life, they find themselves embroiled in a vicious ranch feud.

Once more Wayne Morgan casts aside his identity and dons the long black cloak and mask of the Masked Rider. His mission is in the town of Timberlake, where a gun-hungry man has laid a trap for a young homesteader. There this killer has swaggered out to the street.

The sun's last rays splashed over his red hair, over his long doeskin jacket and dark velvet trousers. The pearl-handled six-shooter was low on his thigh.

The Red Ace Saloon was near the lower end of the street. Mostly for show, because he knew the settlement was watching him from doorways and windows, Trumbo started walking slowly up the middle of the street.

He walked slowly, swaggeringly, a sneering grin on his thin lips. But he was darkly angry inside, for by now he was convinced that Thorne wouldn't show up—and Trumbo had wanted savagely to kill the homesteader who had humiliated him.

Suddenly there was a wild clatter of hoofs.

Trumbo's red head jerked up. Then he stopped, his grin fading, his muddy eyes narrowing down with surprise and wariness.

A magnificent black stallion was thundering along the street, its churning hoofs stirring up geysers of dust, driving straight toward him. Mounted on the stallion was a black-garbed figure, seeming a part of the stallion himself, his dark cape billowing out behind him.

Behind the black domino mask the rider's eyes were riveted on Jess Trumbo, bleak and uncompromising.

The muted cry ran like wildfire through the settlement, "The Masked Rider!"

The Masked Rider drove the stallion straight on at Trumbo, as if he would run him down. But, thirty feet from the gunman, a slight pressure on his knees stopped the powerful animal with amazing quickness.

Even before the forward momentum had stopped, the Masked Rider left the saddle in a graceful flying leap and landed agilely on his feet. He stepped out of the fogging dust, confronting Trumbo, hands empty, like a black figure of doom.

"I hate to see you disappointed, Trumbo," said the Masked Rider in a clear, cold voice. "Thorne couldn't come, so he sent me to take his place. It's your move, Texas man!"

And there you have the start of the fast gun-action of HOUNDS OF PERDITION, by Gunnison Steele, in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. It's a novel that you won't forget, hombres. It's a tale packed full of steers, cayuses, Colts, and hounds. The mystery that sets man against man in Windigo Basin takes action to solve, and our friend, Wayne Morgan, rides hard all the way through the plot, with a smoking gun in his fist.

There will be other stories, too, and another Trail Talk by Foghorn Clancy. So look forward to a grand issue. The next MASKED RIDER WESTERN is a winner.

Our Letter Box

THE old saying that one man's meat is another man's poison certainly holds true when it comes to reading the authors of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Recently we asked you readers to write in and tell us which stories you think are best, so that we will be able to get after the authors and make them write just the way you want them to.

Since that time the mailman has been staggering into our office with post cards and

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envelopes which don't always agree. Let us print a few samples.

I like MASKED RIDER WESTERN better than any other magazine. I have just finished reading GUNTRAP TRAIL. Why don't you let the people in the end find out who the Masked Rider is? I hope you never take Blue Hawk out. I don't want you to put too many girls in these stories. There is now one in every one of them.—*James Larry Pilgrim, Union, Miss.*

I like MASKED RIDER WESTERN better than any other magazine I have read. But I agree with Tom Odenbaugh. I think it ought to have a little romance in the stories. But even if you don't print any more, I will still like it better than any other book.—*Holly Fay Davis, Sandy, Oregon.*

Now there are two letters starting off on the same foot, saying the same thing in the first sentence, and then both writers come to different conclusions. And note that one of those letters is from way down in the Deep South and the other is from up north in the Far West.

It is mighty interesting to hear what the readers from different parts of the country have to say. But distance isn't the only thing that makes for a change of mind.

All of the Masked Rider stories are fine, but here's one I liked better than any—BRAND OF THE UNKNOWN.—*Bob Heaton, Detroit, Mich.*

I sure do like MASKED RIDER WESTERN, and RAIDERS OF RIFLE ROCK was my favorite.—*Pearl D. Gelliland, Garfield, Ark.*

Here we have two readers living much closer together than our friends in Mississippi and Oregon, but they don't agree on the best story.

The story I liked best was WAR IN MASSACRE BASIN, by Charles N. Heckelmann. You asked me to tell you and there it is.—*Tom Harding, Pittsfield, Mass.*

You printed a story some time ago, DEATH IN THE SADDLE, by Hascal Giles, and I think that was just about the best one I have ever read in MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Next to Hascal Giles I like Lee E. Wells for an author. The only criticism I can think of is that Blue Hawk doesn't play a big enough part.—*Harold Timms, Boston, Mass.*

And for the last letter, we turn back to the old subject that has bothered a great many of our readers.

I've been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for two years, and I think it is just splendid. It will continue to be just that as long as the stories are chuck full of action and you leave the romance out.—*Vera M. Easley, Osyka, Miss.*

So there you are, partners. No two readers seem to agree on the questions of romance and stories. There's no way to tell what a letter writer is going to say. It makes no difference what State you live in, what part of the country. And what one reader says in the East might bring another reader from the West into the argument. But if that reader far out West doesn't write at all, he certainly isn't going to put his State on the map. You friends of MASKED RIDER WESTERN with some local pride, better start writing us your likes and dislikes!

And don't forget to address all your letters and post cards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. When those epistles come in, we'll sure be grateful. Thanks in advance to everybody. —THE EDITOR

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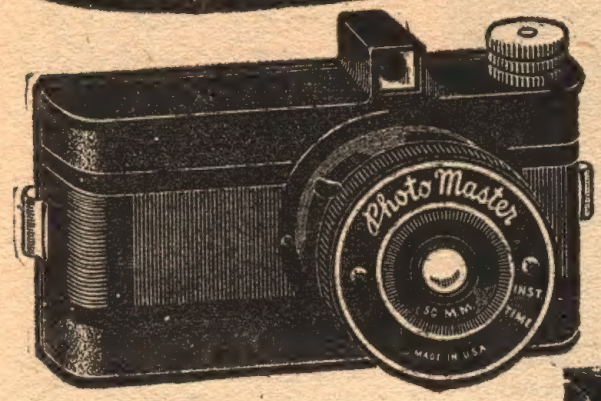

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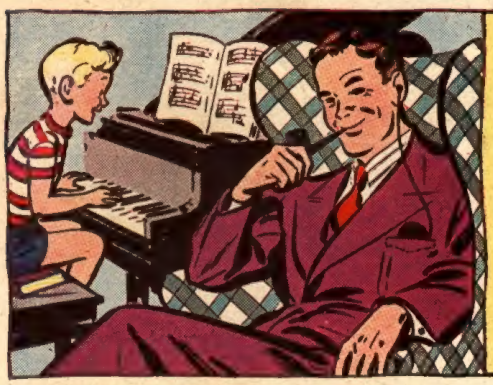

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